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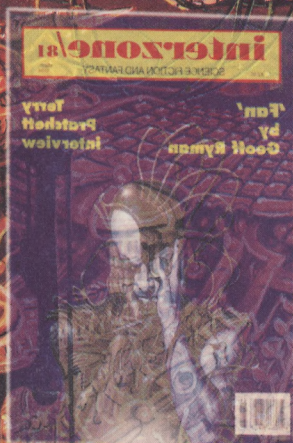
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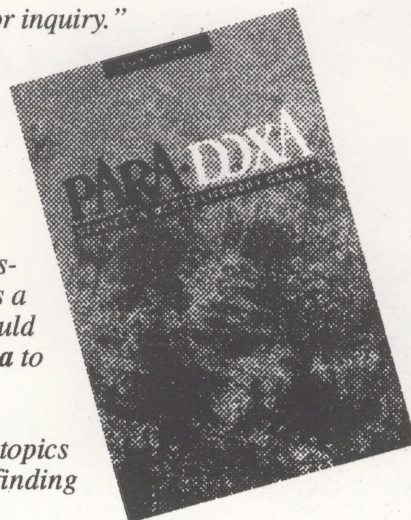
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**Interzone**  
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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

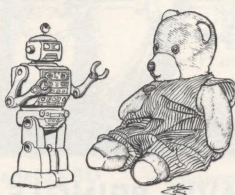
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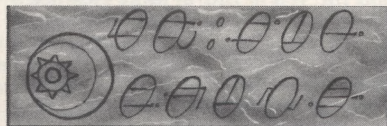


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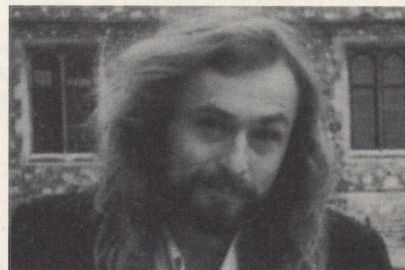
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**I**t's our hundredth issue, so let's celebrate by being upbeat about science fiction.

Is science fiction dead, or dying? One might be excused for thinking so, to judge from some of the things that have been said lately – my own editorial in *Interzone* 99, comparing the sf genre to the vanishing western; Christopher Priest's negative comments in his interview in that same issue; and Brian Stableford's remarks (as reported by Dave Langford in issue 99's "Ansible Link") to the effect that at least one major book publisher believes "the UK sf market is now too small to be worth bothering with." And yet, and yet...

Although the genre is supposedly in the doldrums, there's a remarkable amount of science fiction around – and much of it is good. If we leave aside fantasy (for the moment), and anything that smacks of supernatural horror, and everything that can be labelled "spinoffery" (sf movie novelizations, series novels inspired by TV shows, comics, games, etc), there is still a considerable quantity of science fiction being published. I'm talking about the real stuff, the pure quill – speculative sf which takes its cues from science and technology, which deals seriously with the future (or the future-in-the-present), which tackles subjects such as space travel, computerization, biotechnology, social relations, and a host of other themes that may be described as "relevant."

### A Pile of Good SF Novels

Take a look at our "Books Received" columns over the past twelve months. We try to describe all books by category, so it's easy enough to eliminate the fantasy, the horror, the spinoffery, and the associational non-fiction. What's left, for the most part, is original science fiction; and there is enough of it being published in the mid-1990s to keep anyone in good reading seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, year in and year out.

Science-fiction novels of the past year or so include: Brian Aldiss's *Somewhere East of Life*; Roger MacBride Allen's *The Shattered Sphere*; Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason's *Ill Wind*; Poul Anderson's *The Stars Are Also Fire*; Catherine Asaro's *Primary Inversion*; Pauline Ashwell's *Project Farcry*; Iain Banks's *Feersum Endjinn*; John Barnes's *Mother of Storms* and *Kaleidoscope Century*; Stephen Baxter's *Ring* and *The Time Ships*; Greg Bear's *Legacy*; Gregory Benford's *Furious Gulf* and *Sailing Bright Eternity*; Alexander Beshers's *Rim: A Novel of Virtual Reality*; Ben Bova's *Death Dream*; David Brin's *Brightness Reef*; Eric Brown's *Engineman*; Richard Calder's *Dead Boys*; Orson Scott Card's *Earthfall* and *Earth-born* (etc); Jeffrey A. Carver's *Neptune Crossing* and *Strange Attractors*; Suzy McKee Charnas's *The Furies*; C. J. Cherryh's *Tripoint*, *Foreigner* and *Invader*; Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee's *Rama Revealed*; Alfred Coppel's

## INTERFACE



### DAVID PRINGLE

*Glory and Glory's War*; Gordon R. Dickson's *Other*; J. R. Dunn's *This Side of Judgment*; Greg Egan's *Permutation City*; Christopher Evans's *Mortal Remains*; Anne Gay's *To Bathe in Lightning*; Kathleen Ann Goonan's *Queen City Jazz*; Colin Greenland's *Seasons of Plenty*; Nicola Griffith's *Slow River*; Peter F. Hamilton's *A Quantum Murder* and *The Nano Flower*; James P. Hogan's *The Immortality Option*; Simon Ings's *Hotwire*; Gwyneth Jones's *North Wind*; Richard Kadrey's *Kamikaze L'Amour*; James Patrick Kelly's *Wildlife*; Katharine Kerr's *Freeze Frames*; Nancy Kress's *Beggars & Choosers*; and Jonathan Lethem's *Gun, With Occasional Music*.

They also include: Paul J. McAuley's *Fairyland*; Ian McDonald's *Necroville* and *Chaga*; Maureen F. McHugh's *Half the Day is Night*; Ken MacLeod's *The Star Fraction*; Sean McMullen's *Voices in the Light* and *Mirrormen Rising*; Linda Nagata's *The Bohr Maker*; Jamil Nasir's *Quasar*; Jeff Noon's *Pollen*; Rebecca Ore's *Gaia's Toys*; Frederik Pohl's *The Voices of Heaven*; Robert Reed's *Beyond the Veil of Stars*; Mike Resnick's *A Miracle of Rare Design*; Mary Rosenblum's *The Stone Garden*; Kristine Kathryn Rusch's *Alien Influences*; Robert J. Sawyer's *End of an Era* and *The Terminal Experiment*; Melissa Scott's *Shadow Man*; Robert Silverberg's *Hot Sky at Midnight*; Alison Sinclair's *Legacies*; Norman Spinrad's *Pictures at 11*; Brian Stableford's *Serpent's Blood*; Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*; Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather*; John E. Stith's *Reunion on Neverend*; Tricia Sullivan's *Lethe*; Sheri S. Tepper's *Shadow's End*; Harry Turtledove's *Worldwar: In the Balance* (etc); Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Reluctant Voyagers*; Ian Watson's *The Fallen Moon* (etc); Robert Charles Wilson's *Mysterium*; David

Wingrove's *White Moon, Red Dragon* (etc); Gene Wolfe's *Caldé of the Long Sun* (etc); and Jim Young's *Armed Memory*. There are no doubt many others, particularly from American publishers such as Ace, AvoNova and Baen who tend not to send us review copies. Some important current sf names (e.g. Kim Stanley Robinson) have published nothing new in the past year, but are known to have novels pending. (And I haven't even mentioned anything by Niven and Pournelle, or the prolific Anne McCaffrey – or, for that matter, Newt Gingrich.)

### Long Live Science Fiction

So: have you read all, or most, of the books listed above? I doubt you have – and nor have I. But they are all science fiction, and they all look as though they may be worth reading. Several of them have been hailed by reviewers as brilliant. Although the majority are American works, a substantial minority are by British writers (and Australians and Canadians). Many of them are by women. On the face of it, this is a very healthy list. How can a genre which produces such a pile of books in the space of little more than a year be described as "dying"? Science fiction's doom-sayers should perhaps settle down to read the above novels; then let's hear from them again.

Meanwhile, another (and more specifically British) sign of the genre's vigour is the list of magazines on the opposite page. This may seem a paradoxical claim. Most of those UK magazines were failures, and of course they encompass fantasy and horror (genres which are not the subject of this editorial, nor of last month's) as well as science fiction; but the fact is that there have been at least 22 British attempts (plus *Interzone*) to launch professional magazines of imaginative fiction (mainly science fiction) in the past quarter of a century. Think about it: that's an average of nearly one a year – not counting a vast number of smaller, "non-professional" fiction magazines (of which *Scheherazade* is a good example in the UK at present). Similar attempts, some of them successful, continue in the USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. It seems there are a great many people who dream of launching new sf magazines. Again, can a genre which spurs such activity be regarded as "moribund"? Of course not.

Science fiction lives. Like the rest of imaginative fiction, it is a necessity, not a luxury; human beings are story-telling animals, and the impulse will out, however adverse the circumstances. Sf, in particular, is a genre suited to times of change; it is changing itself, and will continue to change, but it is not withering and dying. As one witness to that, *Interzone* has been here for 100 issues now, and intends to be around for at least the same number of issues to come.

David Pringle



# British Science-Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Magazines 1970-1995 (*Interzone* excepted)

This is a list of all the relatively short-run UK fiction magazines which have come and (mostly) gone since the death of the long-lived *New Worlds* in 1970. Magazines which consist primarily of non-fiction are excluded (e.g. *Starburst* and other media mags; also *White Dwarf* and other gaming mags, although these have been known to include the occasional short story); also excluded are magazines which are essentially paperback books (e.g. the most recent, four-issue, incarnation of the great *New Worlds* itself). All of the following fiction magazines seemed at least to aspire to professional status, and to pay their contributors. It is difficult to draw absolute distinctions between professional, semi-professional and amateur, but what one might term "fiction fanzines" – i.e. very small-press products usually published in A5 format with monochrome covers – are also excluded from this list. The term "fiction fanzine" is hated by some people – sorry, Chris Reed! – but we need to make such distinctions in order to keep this list manageable. Thanks to mine-of-information Mike Ashley for his assistance with some facts and dates, although any faults or omissions in this list are not his responsibility. (In most cases, where no publisher's name is given it can be assumed that the editor was the publisher.) – DP



*Vision of Tomorrow* (sf) – monthly; 12 issues; Aug. 1969-Sep. 1970; publisher Ronald E. Graham; editor Philip Harbottle.

*Science Fiction Monthly* (sf) – monthly; 28 issues; Feb. 1974-May 1976; publisher New English Library; editors Pat Hornsey, Julie Davis.

*Other Times* (sf/fantasy) – quarterly; 2 issues; Nov. 1975-Feb. 1976; editor Andrew Ellsmore.

*Vortex* (sf/fantasy) – monthly; 5 issues; Jan.-May 1977; editor Keith Seddon.

*Fantasy Tales* (fantasy/horror) – irregular; 17 issues; Summer 1977-Summer 1987; editors Steve Jones, Dave Sutton (followed by a further incarnation, 1988-91, as a paperback anthology series).

*Ad Astra* (sf) – bimonthly; 16 issues; Oct./Nov. 1978-Sept./Oct. 1981; editor James Manning.

*Something Else* (sf/fantasy) – irregular; 3 issues; Spring 1980-Spring 1984; editor Charles Partington.

*Extro* (sf) – bimonthly; 3 issues; Feb./Mar.-Jul./Aug. 1982; editor Paul Campbell (previously a fiction fanzine).

*UK Omni* (sf) – 1 issue; Autumn 1984; publisher Northern & Shell; editor Jon Chambers.

*Fear* (horror) – bimonthly, then monthly; 34 issues; Jul./Aug. 1988-Oct. 1991; publisher Newsfield; editor John Gilbert.

*The Gate* (sf) – irregular; 3 issues; 1989-Dec. 1990; publisher Richard Newcombe; editors Maureen Porter, Paul Cox.

*BBR* (sf/fantasy) – quarterly; 5 issues; Spring 1990-Summer 1991; editor Chris Reed (previously a fiction fanzine entitled *Back Brain Recluse*, 14 issues, 1984-1989; still publishing as an occasional, approximately yearly, anthology to subscribers only).

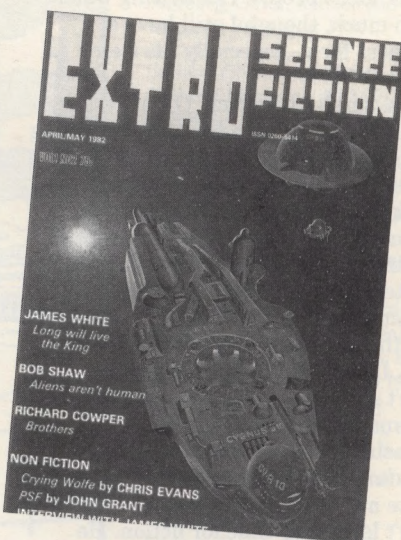
*Skeleton Crew* (horror) – 10 issues; Jul. 1990-Apr. 1991; publisher Argus; editors Dave Hughes, Dave Reeder (previously a fiction fanzine).

*Amaranth* (fantasy) – 2 issues; 1990-1991; editor Rob Jeffrey.

*R.E.M.* (sf) – irregular; 2 issues; Spring/Summer 1991-Nov. 1992; editor Arthur Straker.

*Nexus* (sf/fantasy) – irregular; 3 issues + 1 issue in combination with *Interzone* 88; Apr. 1991-Autumn 1994; editor Paul Brazier.

*Frighteners* (horror) – 1 issue; Jul. 1991; publisher Newsfield.



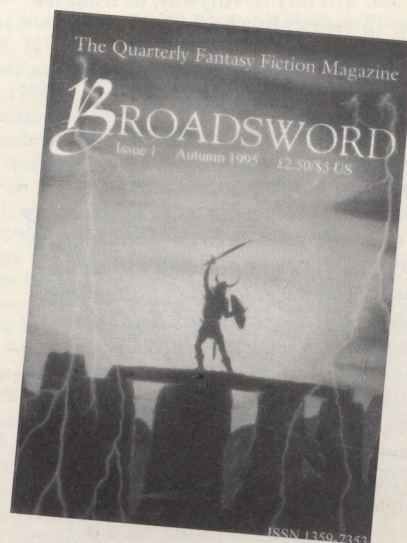
*New Moon SF* (sf) – irregular; 2 issues; Sept. 1991-Jan. 92; editor Trevor Jones (previously a fiction fanzine entitled *Dream SF*, 29 issues).

*Far Point* (sf) – bimonthly; 4 issues; Nov./Dec. 1991-May/June 1992; editor Charlie Rigby.

*Dark Asylum* (horror) – monthly; 3 issues; March-May 1995; editors, Bianca Broderick & Mansel Wetherell (rumoured to have ceased).

*Beyond* (sf/fantasy) – bimonthly; April/May 1995-; editor David Riley (still publishing).

*Broadsword* (fantasy) – quarterly; Autumn 1995-; debut issue just out (see advert on inside front cover of *Interzone* 98).





Dear Editors:

It's good to see *Interzone's* issue numbers notching up towards 100 — I can't wait to see you join those ranks. And it's astonishing to see a magazine these days giving some credit to David H. Keller ["The Creators of Science Fiction, 3" by Brian Stableford, *IZ* 97]. As Brian says, there aren't many who would know of him nowadays, but he was the most popular contributor to Gernsback's magazines, and one of the better ideas people. His writing wasn't up to much, though I still have a fondness for it, especially his weird fiction.

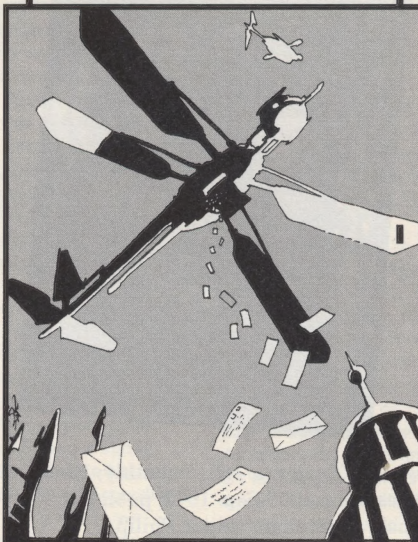
One small nit to pick. On page 56 Brian says that with Gernsback moving out of the picture (by about 1933/34) Keller had greater difficulty finding markets for his sf. That's true to an extent, but by then Keller wasn't writing any sf. Much of his sf had been written by about 1932. Thereafter he concentrated on weird fiction when he had the time, and there was little of that. In fact, for Keller, Gernsback didn't move out of the picture. Keller became editor of *Sexology* for Gernsback in 1933 and its companion *Popular Medicine* in 1934, and since he wrote most of the issues as well this didn't leave any time for fiction. He stayed editor of these magazines (and a third called *Facts of Life*) until 1938. I believe Keller found it easier to get money out of Gernsback as an editor (as it was easier to threaten not to deliver an issue on time) than as a writer. It was in 1938 that he returned to writing fiction.

Seeing you list all those Greenwood Press books ["Books Received," *IZ* 97] reminds me that my *Supernatural Index* is at last out. I don't have a spare copy to send you or John Clute, I'm afraid, though I did ask Greenwood to send you a review copy, so I hope they do. It's been priced at \$195, which should guarantee a total lack of sales, I would've thought. That converts to £125, but I bet they price the UK import even higher than that and then no one will buy it! Anyway, at least it's out, 18 years after I decided to do it.

**Mike Ashley**  
Chatham, Kent

**Editor:** Mike Ashley's information about Keller and Gernsback may seem *recondite*, but it reminds us that *sf* historical scholarship (even scholarship as well-informed as Brian Stableford's) may sometimes be guilty of tunnel vision. There is a world of publishing outside the science-fiction field: how many of us knew that Hugo Gernsback (the "father" of *sf*) published magazines called *Sexology* and *Popular Medicine*, or indeed that David H. Keller edited them? The information may not be earth-shattering, but I do find it of some minor fascination. As to the Greenwood Press *Supernatural Index*, no, I'm

## INTERACTION



## READERS' LETTERS

*afraid we have not received a review copy, but at least Mike's letter may alert interested readers to its appearance. I understand that it's an index to all the weird, supernatural and ghost-story anthologies in the English language, and it sounds like a colossal labour of love. I hope it achieves many sales to American libraries, Mike!*

Dear Editors:

Thanks to Neil Jones for a remarkably even-handed review of my Judge Dredd novel *Wetworks* (*IZ* 98), despite the fact that he obviously didn't pick up on any of the jokes, which always sort of inconveniences a joke book. Entirely my fault: I should have made them actually funny — although to take the blurb-line "every day and twice on Sundays" entirely straight, as it were, strikes me as missing the point a bit.

Anyhow, I'm writing to stick my diminutive oar into what promises to be a useful debate about the distinctions between the "spinoffery" and the "real" — which is precisely the same debate as between pop-culture and art with a capital A, or popular fiction versus literature with a capital L. Only the names on the labels change. What it boils down to in books full of made-up stuff that didn't really happen is the distinction between the novel and storytelling.

Hard *sf*, like a novel, takes an idea and explicates it. And it doesn't matter whether the actual idea is recombinant RNA-engineering or a stylistic attempt to detail the minute-to-minute events of a guy wandering around Dublin for a day; the work is a construct to show the idea off and must be judged upon whether or not it has been examined fully, whether every implication has

been followed to the end. All else is secondary, the idea is the star; a novel is about how this single entity *affects* everything else.

A story, on the other hand, is *about* everything else; the raw stuff of life. It's about people doing things and having things done to them and how they feel about it. It's about articulating and sharing common experience — falling in love, having sex, fantasies of killing someone, fearing for one's life. It matters not one jot whether the obstacle between the protagonist and his heart's desire, say, is a long-standing family feud with the Capulets or that she's a methane-breathing protozoon from Praxis IV — a story stands of falls on whether it triggers recognition, sympathy and gut-response, on whether it lives. Specific ideas *per se* are beside the point; we don't stop liking kisses because we've been kissed before. Being able to string two coherent *thoughts* together is beside the point, sometimes.

Both approaches have their merits and if kept in balance can feed off each other, in much the way that the *sf* field was once big enough to contain both Heinlein at his most totalitarian and Ellison at his most rabid. But the balance has shifted catastrophically. Hard *sf* now seems to be the only *sf*, by definition, and those of us who couldn't give a toss about getting the vectors and the physics right, who simply use the *sf* tropes to displace the narrative and tell our slam-bang stories about sex and death and the stuff that really matters, stand as diametrically opposed to it as in 1930s Germany the ordinary, squabbling, fucked-up and not particularly noble factions stood against the single, monolithic Idea of Nazism. There has always been the serious-*sf*/pulp *sf* divide, but while we were once a vital and integral, if looked down upon, part of the country, now our ghettos have been actively relocated to the borderlands. The edge is the only place we're allowed to live, in the hope that we'll eventually get the message and go away, and then the corpus will at last be *pure*.

Be warned, however. Over the next few years it's going to be the periphery niches and ghettos that survive. I understand that last year Virgin sold something like 1.2 million books in their *Doctor Who* series alone. That's maybe 24 new nominal *sf* titles a year, regularly selling 50,000 copies apiece. People actually like us. You've got the beautifully crafted but fundamentally dead and static constructs. We've got the life.

**Dave Stone**  
London

**Editor:** "Hard *sf* now seems to be the only *sf*?" You puzzle us with that statement, but there's no space to go into the argument here. More letters on this and kindred topics next issue.





I don't remember the first time I saw BETsi. She was like the air I breathed. She was probably there when I was born.

BETsi looked like a vacuum cleaner, bless her. She had long carpeted arms, and a carpeted top with loops of wool like hair. She was huggable, vaguely.

I don't remember hugging her much. I do remember working into that wool all kinds of unsuitable substances – spit, ice cream, dirt from the pots of basil.

My mother talked to BETsi about my behaviour. Mostly I remember my mother as a freckled and orange blur, always desperate to be moving, but sometimes she stayed still long enough for me to look at her.

"This is Booker, BETsi." my mother said at dictation speed. "You must stay clean, BETsi." She thought BETsi was stupid. She was the one who sounded like a robot. "Please repeat."

"I must stay clean," BETsi replied. BETsi sounded bright, alert, smooth-talking, with a built-in smile in the voice.

"This is what I mean, BETsi: You must not let Clancy get you dirty. Why do you let Clancy get you dirty?"

I pretended to do sums on a pretend calculator.

While BETsi said, "Because he is a boy. From the earliest age, most boys move in a very different, more aggressive way than girls. His form of play will be rougher and can be indulged in to a certain extent."

Booker had programmed BETsi to talk about my development in front of me. That was so I would know what was going on. It was honest in a way; she did not want me to be deceived. On the other hand, I felt like some kind of long-running project in child

psychology. Booker was more like a clinical consultant who popped in from time to time to see how things were progressing.

You see, I was supposed to be a genius. My mother thought she was a genius, and had selected my father out of a sperm bank for geniuses. His only flaw, she told me, was his tendency towards baldness. BETsi could have a told her: baldness is inherited from the maternal line.

She showed me a picture of herself in an old *Cosmopolitan* article. It caused a stir at the time. "*The New Motherhood*," it was called. *Business women choose a new way.*

There is a photograph of Booker looking young and almost

pretty, beautifully lit and cradling her swollen tummy. Her whole face, looking down on herself, is illuminated with love.

In the article, she says: I know my son will be a genius. She says, I know he'll have the right genes, and I will make sure he has the right upbringing. *Cosmopolitan* made no comment. They were making a laughing stock out of her.

Look, my mother was Booker McCall, chief editor of a rival magazine company with a £100 million-a-year turnover and only 15 permanent employees of which she was second in command. Nobody had a corporate job in those days, and if they did, it was wall-to-wall politics and performance. Booker McCall had stakeholders to suck up to, editors to commission, articles to read and tear to pieces. She had layouts to throw at designers' heads. She had style to maintain, she had hair to keep up, shoes to repair, menus to plan. And then she had to score whatever

## WARMTH GEOFF RYMAN



she was on at the time. She was a very unhappy woman, with every reason to be.

She was also very smart, and BETsi was a good idea.

I used to look out of the window of the flat and the outside world looked blue, grey, harsh. Sunlight always caught the grime on the glass and bleached everything out, and I thought that adults moved out into a hot world in which everybody shouted all the time. I never wanted to go out.

BETsi was my whole world. She had a screen, and she would show me paintings, one after another. Velasquez, Goya. She had a library of picture books – about monkeys, or fishing villages or ghosts. She would allow me one movie a week, but always the right movie. *Jurassic Park*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Tarzan on Mars*. We'd talk about them.

"The dinosaurs are made of light," she told me. "The computer tells the video what light to make and what colours the light should be so that it looks like a dinosaur."

"But dinosaurs really lived!" I remember getting very upset, I wailed at her. "They were really really real."

"Yes, but not those, those are just like paintings of dinosaurs."

"I want to see a real dinosaur!" I remember being heartbroken. I think I loved their size, their bulk, the idea of their huge hot breath. In my daydreams, I had a dinosaur for a friend and it would protect me in the world outside.

"Clancy," BETsi warned me. "You know what is happening now."

"Yes!" I shouted, "but knowing doesn't stop it happening!"

BETsi had told me that I was shy. Did you know that shyness has a clinical definition?

I'd been tested for it. Once, BETsi showed me the test. First she showed me what she called the benchmark. On her screen, through a haze of fingerprints and jam, was one fat, calm, happy baby. Not me. "In the test," BETsi explained, "a brightly coloured mobile is shown to the child. An infant who will grow up to be an outgoing and confident adult will tend to look at the mobile with calm curiosity for a time, get bored, and then look away."

The fat happy baby smiled a little bit, reached up for the spinning red ducks and bright yellow bunnies, then sighed and looked around for something new.

"A shy baby will get very excited. This is you, when we gave you the same test."

And there I was, looking solemn, 200 years old at six months, my infant face crossed with some kind of philosophical puzzlement. Then, they show me the mobile. My face lights up, I start to bounce, I gurgle with pleasure, delight, spit shoots out of my mouth. I get over-excited, the mobile is slightly beyond my grasp. My face crumples up, I jerk with the first little cries. Moments later I am screaming myself purple, and trying to escape the mobile, which has begun to terrify me.

"That behaviour is hardwired," BETsi explained. "You will always find yourself getting too happy and then fearful and withdrawn. You must learn to con-

trol the excitement. Then you will be less fearful."

It's like with VR. When they first started making that, they discovered they did not know enough about how we see and hear to duplicate the experience. They had to research people first. Same here. Before they could mimic personality, they first had to find out a lot more about what personality was.

BETsi had me doing Transcendental Meditation and yoga at three years old. She had me doing what I now recognize was the Alexander Technique. I didn't just nap, I had my knees up and my head on a raised wooden pillow. This was to elongate my back – I was already curling inward from tension.

After she got me calm, BETsi would get me treats. She had Booker's credit-card number and authorization to spend. BETsi could giggle. When the ice cream was delivered, or the new CD full of clip art, or my new S&M Toddler black leather gear, or my Barbie Sex-Change doll, BETsi would giggle.

I know. She was programmed to giggle so that I would learn it was all right to be happy. But it sounded as though there was something who was happy just because I was. For some reason, that meant I would remember all by myself to stay calm.

"I'll open it later," I would say, feeling very adult.

"It's ice cream, you fool," BETsi would say. "It'll melt."

"It will spread all over the carpet!" I whispered in delight.

"Booker will get ma-had," BETsi said in a sing-song voice. BETsi knew that I always called Booker by her name.

BETsi could learn. She would have had to be trained to recognize and respond to my voice and Booker's. She was programmed to learn who I was and what I needed. I needed conspiracy. I needed a confidant.

"Look. You melt the ice-cream and I will clean it up," she said.

"It's ice cream you fool," I giggled back. "If it melts, I won't be able to eat it!" We both laughed.

BETsi's screen could turn into a mirror. I'd see my own face and inspect it carefully for signs of being like Tarzan. Sometimes, as a game, she would have my own face talk back to me in my own voice. Or I would give myself a beard and a deeper voice to see what I would look like as a grown up. To have revenge on Booker, I would make myself bald.

I was fascinated by men. They were mythical beasts, huge and loping like dinosaurs, only hairy. The highlight of my week was when the window cleaner arrived. I would trail after him, too shy to speak, trying to puff myself up to the same size as he was. I thought he was a hero, who cleaned windows and then saved people from evil.

"You'll have to bear with Clancy," BETsi would say to him. "He doesn't see many men."

"Don't you get out, little fella?" he would say. His name was Tom.

"It's not safe," I managed to answer.

Tom tutted. "Oh, that's true enough. What a world, eh? You have to keep the kiddies locked in all day.



S'like a prison." I thought that all men had South London accents.

He talked to BETsi as if she was a person. I don't think Tom could have been very bright, but I do think he was a kindly soul. I think BETsi bought him things to give to me.

"Here's an articulated," he said once, and gave me a beautifully painted Matchbox lorry.

I took it in silence. I hated myself for being so tongue-tied. I wanted to swagger around the flat with him like Nick Nolte or Wesley Snipes.

"Do men drive in these?" I managed to ask.

"Some of them, yeah."

"Are there many men?"

He looked blank. I answered for him. "There's no jobs for men."

Tom hooted with laughter. "Who's been filling your head?" he asked.

"Clancy has a very high symbol-recognition speed," BETsi told him. "Not genius, you understand. But very high. It will be useful for him in interpretative trades. However, he has almost no spatial reasoning. He will only ever dream of being a lorry driver."

"I'm a klutz," I translated.

Booker was an American – probably the most famous American in London at the time. BETsi was programmed to modulate her speech to match her owners. To this day, I can't tell English and American accents apart unless I listen carefully. And I can imitate neither. I talk like BETsi.

I remember Tom's face, like a suet pudding, pale, blotchy, uneasy. "Poor little fella," he said. "I'd rather not know all that about myself."

"So would Clancy," said BETsi. "But I am programmed to hide nothing from him."

Tom sighed. "Get him with other kids," he told her.

"Oh, that is all part of the plan," said BETsi.

I was sent to Social Skills class. I failed. I discovered that I was terrified without BETsi, that I did not know what to do or say to people when she wasn't there. I went off into a corner with a computer screen, but it seemed cold, almost angry with me. If I didn't do exactly the right thing it wouldn't work, and it never said anything nice to me. The other children were like ghosts. They flittered around the outside of my perceptions. In my mind, I muted the noise they made. They sounded as if they were shouting from the other side of the window, from the harsh blue-grey world.

The consultants wrote on my first report: Clancy is socially backward, even for his age.

Booker was furious. She showed up one Wednesday and argued about it.

"Do you realize that a thing like that could get in my son's record?"

"It happens to be true, Miss McCall." The consultant was appalled and laughed from disbelief.

"This crèche leaves children unattended and blames them when their development is stunted." Booker was yelling and pointing at the woman. "I want that report changed. Or I will report on you!"

"Are you threatening to write us up in your maga-

zines?" the consultant asked in a quiet voice.

"I'm telling you not to victimize my son for your own failings. If he isn't talking to the other children, it's your job to help him."

Talking to other kids was my job. I stared at my shoes, mortified. I didn't want Booker to help me, but I half-wanted her to take me out of the class, and I knew that I would hate it if she did.

I went to BETsi for coaching.

"What you may not know," she told me. "Is that you have a natural warmth that attracts people."

"I do?" I said.

"Yes. And all most people want from other people is that they be interested in them. Shall we practice?"

On her screen, she invented a series of children. I would try to talk to them. BETsi didn't make it easy.

"Do you like reading?" I'd ask a little girl on the screen.

"What?" she replied with a curling lip.

"Books," I persisted, as brave as I could be. "Do you read books?"

She blinked – bemused, bored, confident.

"Do... do you like *Jurassic Park*?"

"It's old! And it doesn't have any story."

"Do you like new movies?" I was getting desperate.

"I play games. *Bloodlust Demon*." The little girl's eyes went narrow and fierce. That was it. I gave up.

"BETsi," I complained. "This isn't fair." Booker would not allow me to play computer games.

BETsi chuckled and used her own voice. "That's what it's going to be like, kiddo."

"Then show me some games."

"Can't," she said.

"Not in the program," I murmured angrily.

"If I tried to show you one, I'd crash," she explained.

So I went back to Social Skills class determined to talk and it was every bit as awful as BETsi had said, but at least I was ready.

I told them all, straight out: I can't play games, I'm a klutz, all I can do is draw. So, I said, tell me about the games.

And that was the right thing to do. At five I gave up being Tarzan and started to listen, because the kids could at least tell me about video games. They could get puffed up and important, and I would seep envy, which must have been very satisfying for them. But. In a funny kind of way they sort of liked me.

There was a bully called Ian Aston, and suddenly one day the kids told him: "Clancy can't fight, so don't pick on him." He couldn't stand up to all of them.

"See if your Mum will let you visit," they said, "and we'll show you some games."

Booker said no. "It's very nice you're progressing socially, Clancy. But I'm not having you mix just yet. I know what sort of things are in the homes of parents like that, and I'm not having you exposed."

"Your Mum's a posh git," the children said.

"And a half," I replied.

She was also a drug addict. One evening she didn't collect me from Social Class. The consultant tried to



reach her PDA, and couldn't.

"You have a Home Help, don't you?" the consultant asked.

She rang BETsi. BETsi said she had no record in her diary of where Miss McCall might be if not collecting me. BETsi sent round a taxi.

Booker was out for two weeks. She just disappeared.

She'd collapsed on the street, and everything was taken – her hand bag, her shoes, her PDA, even her contact lenses. She woke up blind and raving from barbiturate withdrawal in an NHS ward, which would have mortified her. She claimed to be Booker McCall and several other people as well. I suppose it was also a kind of breakdown. Nobody knew who she was, nobody told us what had happened.

BETsi and I just sat alone in the apartment, eating ice cream and Kellogg's Crunchy Nut Cornflakes.

"Do you suppose Booker will ever come back?" I asked her.

"I do not know where Booker is, kiddo. I'm afraid something bad must have happened to her."

I felt guilty because I didn't care. I didn't care if Booker never came back. But I was scared.

"What happens if you have a disk fault?" I asked BETsi.

"I've just renewed the service contract," she replied. She whirled closer to me, and put a carpeted arm around me.

"But how would they know that something was wrong?"

She gave me a little rousing shake. "I'm monitored, all day so that if there is a problem when your mother isn't here, they come round and repair me."

"But what if you're broken for a real long time? Hours and hours. Days?"

"They'll have a replacement."

"I don't want a replacement."

"In a few hours, she'll be trained to recognize your voice."

"What if it doesn't work? What if the contractors don't hear? What do I do then?"

She printed out a number to call, and a password to enter.

"It probably won't happen," she said. "So I'm going to ask you to do your exercises."

She meant calm me down, as if my fears weren't real, as if it couldn't happen that a machine would break down.

"I don't want to do my exercises. Exercises won't help."

"Do you want to see *Jurassic Park*?" she asked.

"It's old," I said, and thought of my friends at Social Class and of their mothers who were with them.

There was a whirring sound. A panel came up on the screen, like what happened during a service when the engineers came and checked her programming and reloaded the operational system. CONFIGURATION OVERRIDE the panels said.

When that was over BETsi asked. "Would you like to learn how to play *Bloodlust Demon*?"

"Oh!" I said and nothing else. "Oh! Oh! BETsi! Oh!"

And she giggled.

I remember the light on the beige carpet making a

highway towards the screen. I remember the sound of traffic outside, peeping, hooting, the sound of nightfall and loneliness, the time I usually hated the most. But now I was playing *Bloodlust Demon*.

I played it very badly. I kept getting blown up.

"Just keep trying," she said.

"I have no spatial reasoning," I replied. I was learning that I did not like computer games. But for the time being, I had forgotten everything else.

After two weeks, I assumed that Booker had gotten bored and had gone away and would never be back. Then one morning, when the hot world seemed to be pouring in through the grimy windows, someone kicked down the front door.

BETsi made a cage around me with her arms.

"I am programmed for both laser and bullet defence. Take what you want, but do not harm the child. I cannot take your photograph or video you. You will not be recognized. There is no need to damage me."

They broke the glass tables, they threw drawers onto the floor. They dropped their trousers and shat in the kitchen. They took silver dresses, Booker's black box, her jewellery. One of the thieves took hold of my Matchbox lorry and I knew the meaning of loss. I was going to lose my truck. Then the thief walked back across the carpet towards me. BETsi's arms closed more tightly around me. The thief chuckled under his ski mask and left the truck nearby on the sofa.

"There you go, little fella," he said. I never told anyone. It was Tom. Like I said, he wasn't very bright. BETsi was programmed not to recognize him.

So. I knew then what men were; they could go bad. There was part of them that was only ever caged up. I was frightened of men after that.

The men left the door open, and the flat was a ruin, smashed and broken, and BETsi's cage of arms was lifted up, and I began to cry, and then I began to scream over and over and over, and finally some neighbours came, and finally the search was on for Booker McCall.

How could an editor-in-chief disappear for two weeks? "We thought she'd gone off with a new boyfriend," her colleagues said, in the press, to damage her. Politics, wall to wall. It was on TV, the Uncaring Society they called it. No father, no grandparents, neighbours who were oblivious – the deserted child was only found because of a traumatic break in.

Booker was gone a very long time. Barbiturates are the worst withdrawal of all. I visited her, with one of the consultants from my Class. It got her picture in the papers, and a caption that made it sound as though the consultants were the only people who cared.

Booker looked awful. Bright yellow with blue circles under her eyes. She smelled of thin stale sweat.

"Hello, Clancy," she whispered. "I've been in withdrawal."

So what? Tell me something I didn't know. I was hard-hearted. I had been deserted, she had no call on my respect.

"Did you miss me?" She looked like a cut flower that had been left in a vase too long, with smelly



water.

I didn't want to hurt her, so all I said was: "I was scared."

"Poor baby," she whispered. She meant it, but the wave of sympathy exhausted her and she lay back on the pillow. She held out her hand.

I took it and I looked at it.

"Did BETSi take good care of you?" she asked, with her eyes closed.

"Yes," I replied, and began to think, still looking at her fingers. She really can't help all of this, all of this is hardwired. I bet she'd like to be like BETSi, but can't. Anyway, barbiturates don't work on metal and plastic.

Suddenly she was crying, and she'd pushed my hand onto her moist cheek. It was sticky and I wanted to get away, and she said. "Tell me a story. Tell me some beautiful stories."

So I sat and told her the story of *Jurassic Park*. She lay still, my hand on her cheek. At times I thought she was asleep, other times I found I hoped she loved the story as much as I did, raptors and brachiosaurs and T Rex.

When I was finished, she murmured. "At least somebody's happy." She meant me. That was what she wanted to think, that I was all right, that she would not have to worry about me. And that too, I realized, would never change.

She came home. She stayed in bed all day for two more weeks, driving me nuts. "My life is such a mess!" she said, itchy and anxious. She promised me she would spend more time with me, God forbid. She raged against the bastards at BPC. We'd be moving as soon as she was up, she promised me, filling my heart with terror. She succeeded in disrupting my books, my movies, my painting. Finally she threw off the sheets a month early and went back to work. I gathered she still went in for treatment every fortnight. I gathered that booze now took the place of barbies. The smell of the flat changed. And now that I hated men, there were a lot of them, loose after work.

"This is my boy," she would say, with a kind of wobbly pride and introduce me to yet another middle-aged man with a ponytail. "Mr d'Angelo is a designer," she would say, as if she went out with their professions. She started to wear wobbly red lipstick. It got everywhere, on pillows, sheets, walls, and worst of all on my Nutella tumblers.

The flat had been my real world, against the outside, and now all that had changed. I went to school. I had to say goodbye to BETSi, every morning, and goodbye to Booker, who left wobbly red lipstick on my collar. I went to school in a taxi.

"You see," said BETSi, after my first day. "It wasn't bad was it? It works, doesn't it?"

"Yes, BETSi," I remember saying. "It does." The "it" was me. We both meant my precious self. She had done her job.

Through my later school days, BETSi would sit unused in my room – most of the time. Sometimes at night, under the covers, I would reboot her, and the

screen would open up to all the old things, still there. My childhood was already another world – dinosaurs and space cats and puzzles. BETSi would pick up where we had left off, with no sense of neglect, no sense of time or self.

"You're older," she would say. "About twelve. Let me look at you." She would mirror my face, and whirl to herself. "Are you drawing?"

"Lots," I would say.

"Want to mess around with the clip art, kiddo?" she would ask.

And long into the night, when I should have been learning algebra, we would make collages on her screen. I showed surfers on waves that rose up amid galaxies blue and white in space, and through space there poured streams of roses. A row of identical dancing Buddhas was an audience.

"Tell me about your friends, and what you do," she asked, as I cut and pasted. And I'd tell her about my friend John and his big black dog, Toro, and how we were caught in his neighbours' garden. I ran and escaped, but John was caught. John lived outside town in the countryside. And I'd tell her about John's grandfather's farm, full of daffodils in rows. People use them to signal spring, to spell the end of winter. Symbol recognition.

"I've got some daffodils," BETSi said. "In my memory."

And I would put them into the montage for her, though it was not spring any longer.

I failed at algebra. Like everything else in Booker's life, I was something that did not quite pan out as planned. She was good about it. She never upbraided me for not being a genius. There was something in the way she ground out her cigarette that said it all.

"Well, there's always art school," she said, and forced out a blast of blue-white smoke.

It was BETSi I showed my projects to – the A-level exercises in sketching elephants in pencil.

"From a photo," BETSi said. "You can always tell. So. You can draw as well as a photograph. Now what?"

"That's what I think," I said. "I need a style of my own."

"You need to do that for yourself," she said.

"I know," I said, casually.

"You won't always have me to help," she said.

The one thing I will never forgive Booker for is selling BETSi without telling me. I came back from first term at college to find the machine gone. I remember that I shouted, probably for the first time ever. "You did what?"

I remember Booker's eyes widening, blinking. "It's just a machine, Clancy. I mean, it wasn't as if she was a member of the family or anything."

"How could you do it! Where is she?"

"I don't know. I didn't think you'd be so upset. You're being awfully babyish about this."

"What did you do with her?"

"I sold her back to the contract people, that's all." Booker was genuinely bemused. "Look. You are hardly ever here, it isn't as though you use her for anything. She's a child-development tool, for Chris-



sakes. Are you still a child?"

I'd thought Booker had been smart. I'd thought that she had recognized she would not have time to be a mother, and so had bought in BETsi. I thought that meant she understood what BETsi was. She didn't and that meant she had not understood, not even been smart.

"You," I said, "have sold the only real mother I have ever had." I was no longer shouting. I said it at dictation speed. I'm not sure Booker has ever forgiven me.

Serial numbers, I thought. They have serial numbers, maybe I could trace her through those. I rang up the contractors. The kid on the phone sighed.

"You want to trace your BETsi," he said before I'd finished, sounding bored.

"Yes," I said. "I do."

He grunted and I heard a flicker of fingertips on a keyboard.

"She's been placed with another family. Still operational. But," he said, "I can't tell you where she is."

"Why not?"

"Well, Mr McCall. Another family is paying for the service, and the developer is now working with another child. Look. You are not unusual, OK? In fact this happens about half the time, and we cannot have customers disturbed by previous charges looking up their machines."

"Why not?"

"Well," he chortled; it was so obvious to him. "You might try imagining it from the child's point of view. They have a new developer of their own, and then this other person, a stranger, tries to muscle in."

"Just. Please. Tell me where she is."

"Her memory has been wiped," he said, abruptly.

It took a little while. I remember hearing the hiss on the line.

"She won't recognize your voice. She won't remember anything about you. She is just a service vehicle. Try to remember that."

I wanted to strangle the receiver. I sputtered down the line like a car cold-starting. "Don't... couldn't you keep a copy! You know this happens, you bastard. Couldn't you warn people, offer them the disk? Something?"

"I'm sorry sir, but we do, and you turned the offer down."

"I'm sorry?" I was dazed.

"That's what your entry says."

Booker, I thought. Booker, Booker, Booker. And I realized; she couldn't understand, she's just too old. She's just from another world.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have other calls on the line."

"I understand," I replied.

All my books, all my collages, my own face in the mirror. It had been like a library I could visit whenever I wanted to see something from the past. It was as if my own life had been wiped.

Then for some reason, I remembered Tom.

He was fat and 40 and defeated, a bloke. I asked him to break in to the contractor's office and read the files and find who had her.

"So," he said. "You knew then."

"Yup."

He blew out hard though his lips and looked at me askance.

"Thanks for the lorry," I said, by way of explanation.

"I always liked you, you know. You were a nice little kid." His fingers were tobacco-stained. "I can see why you want her back. She was all you had."

He found her all right. I sent him a cheque. Sometimes even now I send him a cheque.

Booker would have been dismayed – BETsi had ended in a resold council flat. I remember, the lift was broken and the stairs smelled of pee. The door itself was painted fire-engine red and had a non-breakable plaque on the doorway. The Andersons, it said amid ceramic pansies. I knocked.

BETsi answered the door. Boom. There she was, arms extended defensively to prevent entry. She'd been cleaned up but there was still rice pudding in her hair. Beyond her, I saw a slumped three-piece

suite and beige carpet littered with toys. There was a smell of baby food and damp flannel.

"BETsi?" I asked, and knelt down in front of her. She scanned me, clicking. I could almost see the wheels turning, and for some reason, I found it funny. "It's OK," I said, "you won't know me, dear."

"Who is it, Betty?" A little girl came running. To breathe the air that flows in through an open door, to see someone new, to see anyone at all.

"A caller, Bumps," replied BETsi. Her voice was different, a harsher, East End lilt. "And I think he's just about to be on his way."

I found that funny too; I still forgave her. It wasn't her fault. Doughty old BETsi still doing her job, with this doubtful man she didn't know trying to gain entry.

There might be, though, one thing she could do.

I talked to her slowly, I tried to imitate an English accent. "You do not take orders from someone with my voice. But I mean no harm, and you may be able to do this. Can you show me my face on your screen?"

She whirred. Her screen flipped out of sleep. There I was.

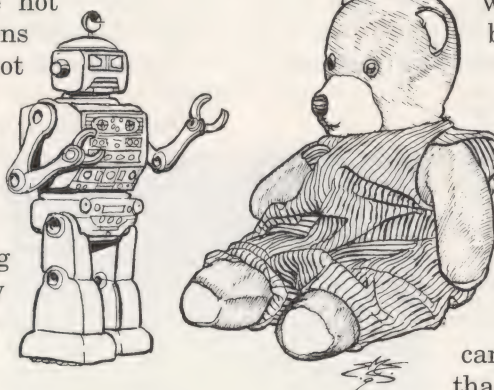
"I am an old charge of yours," I said – both of us, me and my image, his voice echoing mine. "My name is Clancy. All I ask you to do is remember me. Can you do that?"

"I understand what you mean," she said. "I don't have a security reason not to."

"Thank you," I said. "And. See if you can program the following further instructions."

"I cannot take instruction from you."

"I know. But check if this violates security. Set aside part of your memory. Put Bumps into it. Put me and Bumps in the same place, so that even when





they wipe you again. You'll remember us."

She whirled. I began to get excited; I talked like myself.

"Because they're going to wipe you BETsi, whenever they resell you. They'll wipe you clean. It might be nice for Bumps if you remember her. Because we'll always remember you."

The little girl's eyes were on me, dark and serious, 200 years old. "Do what he says, Betty," the child said.

Files opened and closed like mouths. "I can put information in an iced file," said BETsi. "It will not link with any other files, so it will not be usable to gain entry to my systems." Robots and people: these days we all know too much about our inner workings.

I said thank you and goodbye, and said it silently looking into the eyes of the little girl, and she spun away on her heel as if to say: I did that.

I still felt happy, running all the way back to the tube station. I just felt joy.

So that's the story.

It took me a long time to make friends in school, but they were good ones. I still know them, though they are now middle-aged men, clothiers in Toronto, or hearty freelancers in New York who talk about their men and their cats. Make a long story short. I grew up to be one of the people my mother used to hire and abuse.

I am a commercial artist, though more for book and CD covers than magazines. I'm about to be a Dad. One of my clients, a very nice woman. We used to see each other and get drunk at shows. In the hotel bedrooms I'd see myself in the mirror – not quite middle-aged, but with a pony tail. Her name is some kind of mistake. Bertha.

Bertha is very calm and cool and reliable. She called me and said coolly, I'm having a baby and you're the father, but don't worry. I don't want anything from you.

I wanted her to want something from me. I wanted her to say marry me, you bastard. Or at least: could you take care of it on weekends? Not only didn't she want me to worry – it was clear that she didn't want me at all. It was also clear I could expect no more commissions from her.

I knew then what I wanted to do. I went to Hamleys.

There they were, the Next Degradation. Now they call them things like Best Friend or Home Companions, and they've tried to make them look human. They have latex skins and wigs and stiff little smiles. They look like burn victims after plastic surgery, and they recognize absolutely everybody. Some of them are modelled after *Little Women*. You can buy Beth or Amy or Jo. Some poor little rich girls start dressing them up in high fashion – the bills are said to be staggering. You can also buy male models – a lively Huckleberry, or big Jim. I wonder if those might not be more for the Mums, particularly if all parts are in working order.

"Do you... do you have any older models?" I ask at the counter.

The assistant is a sweet woman, apple cheeked,

young, pretty, and she sees straight through me. "We have BETsis," she says archly.

"They still make them?" I say, softly.

"Oh, they're very popular," she says, and pauses, and decides to drop the patter. "People want their children to have them. They loved them."

History repeats like indigestion.

I turn up at conventions like this one. I can't afford a stand but my livelihood depends on getting noticed anyway.

And if I get carried away and believe a keynote speaker trying to be a visionary, if he talks about, say, Virtual Government or Loose Working Practices, then I get overexcited. I think I see God, or the future or something and I get all jittery. And I go into the exhibition hall and there is a wall of faces I don't know and I think: I've got to talk to them, I've got to sell to them. I freeze, and I go back to my room.

And I know what to do. I think of BETsi, and I stretch out on the floor and take hold of my shoulders and my breathing and I get off the emotional roller-coaster. I can go back downstairs, and back into the hall. And I remember that something once said: you have a natural warmth that attracts people, and I go in, and even though I'm a bit diffident, by the end of the convention, we're laughing and shaking hands, and I have their business card. Or maybe we've stayed up drinking till four in the morning, playing *Bloodlust Demon*. They always win. They like that, and we laugh.

It is necessary to be loved. I'm not sentimental: I don't think a computer loved me. But I was hugged, I was noticed, I was cared for. I was made to feel that I was important, special, at least to something. I fear for all the people who do not have that. Like everything else, it is now something that can be bought. It is therefore something that can be denied. It is possible that without BETsi, I might have to stay upstairs in that hotel room, panicked. It is possible that I would end up on barbiturates. It is possible that I could have ended up one of those sweet sad people sitting in the rain in shop doorways saying the same thing in London or New York, in exactly the same accent: any spare change please?

But I didn't. I put a proposition to you.

If there were a God who saw and cared for us and was merciful, then when I died and went to Heaven, I would find among all the other things, a copy of that wiped disk.



Photograph: Paul Brazier

Geoff Ryman's most recent story here was "Home" (issue 93), and his most recent book is the US-published collection *Unconquered Countries* (1994). Canadian-born, he lives in London.



“Give me the patch.”

He hesitates, despite the gun, long enough to confirm that the thing must be genuine. He's cheaply dressed but expensively groomed: manicured and depilated, with the baby-smooth skin of rich middle age. Any card in his wallet would be p-cash only, anonymous but encrypted, useless without his own living fingerprints. He's wearing no jewellery, and his watchphone is plastic; the patch is the only thing worth taking. Good fakes cost 15 cents, good real ones 15 K – but he's the wrong age, and the wrong class, to want to wear a fake for the sake of fashion.

He tugs at the patch gently, and it dislodges itself from his skin; the adhesive rim doesn't leave the faintest weal, or pluck a single hair from his eyebrow. His newly naked eye doesn't blink or squint – but I know it's not truly sighted yet; the suppressed perceptual pathways take hours to reawaken.

He hands me the patch; I half expect it to stick to my palm, but it doesn't. The outer face is black, like anodized metal, with a silver-grey logo of a dragon in one corner – drawn “escaping” from a cut-and-folded drawing of itself, to bite its own tail. Recursive Visions, after Escher. I press the gun harder against his stomach to remind him of its presence, while I glance down and turn the thing over. The inner face appears velvet black at first – but as I tilt it, I catch the reflection of a street light, rainbow-diffracted by the array of quantum-dot lasers. Some plastic fakes are moulded with pits which give a similar effect, but the sharpness of this image – dissected into colours, but not blurred at all – is like nothing I've ever seen before.

I look up at him, and he meets my gaze warily. I know what he's feeling – that icewater in the bowels – but there's something more than fear in his eyes: a kind of dazed curiosity, as if he's drinking in the strangeness of it all. Standing here at three in the morning with a gun to his intestines. Robbed of his most expensive toy. Wondering what else he's going to lose.

I smile sadly – and I know how that looks through the balaclava.

“You should have stayed up at the Cross. What did you want to come down here for? Looking for something to fuck? Something to snort? You should have hung around the nightclubs, and it all would have come to you.”

He doesn't reply – but he doesn't avert his eyes. It looks as if he's struggling hard to understand it all: his terror, the gun, this moment. Me. Trying to take it all in and make sense of it, like an oceanographer caught in a tidal wave. I can't decide if that's admirable, or just irritating.

“What were you looking for? A new experience? I'll give you a new experience.”

Something skids along the ground behind us in the wind: plastic wrapping, or a cluster of twigs. The street is all terraces converted to office space, barred and silent, wired against intruders but otherwise oblivious.

I pocket the patch, and slide the gun higher. I tell him plainly, “If I kill you, I'll put a bullet through your heart. Clean and fast, I promise; I won't leave you lying here bleeding your guts out.”

He makes as if to speak, but then changes his mind. He just stares at my masked face, transfixed. The wind rises up again, cool and impossibly gentle. My watch beeps a short sequence of tones which means it's successfully blocking a signal from his personal safety implant. We're alone in a tiny patch of radio silence: phases cancelling, forces finely balanced.

I think: *I can spare him... or not* – and the lucidity begins, the tearing of the veil, the parting of the fog. *It's all in my hands now.* I don't look up – but I don't need to: I can feel the stars wheeling around me.

I whisper, “I can do it, I can kill you.” We're still staring at each other – but I'm staring right through him now; I'm no sadist, I don't need to see him squirm. His fear is outside me, and what matters is within: *My freedom, the courage to embrace it, the strength to face everything I am without flinching.*

My hand has grown numb; I slide my finger across the trigger, waking the nerve ends. I can feel the perspiration cooling on my forearms, the muscles in my jaw aching from my frozen smile. I can feel my whole body, coiled, tensed, impatient but obedient, awaiting my command.

I pull the gun back, then pistol-whip him hard, smashing the handle across his temple. He cries out and collapses to his knees, blood pouring into one eye. I back away, observing him carefully. He puts down his hands to keep himself from falling on his face, but he's too stunned to do anything but kneel there, bleeding and moaning.

I turn and run, tearing off the balaclava, pocketing the gun, speeding up as I go.

His implant will have made contact with a patrol car in a matter of seconds. I weave through the alleys and deserted side-streets, drunk on the pure visceral chemistry of flight – but still in control, riding instinct smoothly. I hear no sirens – but chances are they wouldn't use them, so I dive for cover at every approaching engine. A map of these streets is burnt into my skull, down to every tree, every wall, every rusting car body. I'm never more than seconds away from shelter of some kind.

Home looms like a mirage, but it's real, and I cross the last lit ground with my heart pounding, trying not to whoop with elation as I unlock the door and slam it behind me.

I'm soaked in sweat. I undress, and pace the house until I'm calm enough to stand beneath the shower, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the music of the exhaust fan. *I could have killed him.* The triumph of it surges through my veins. *It was my choice, alone. There was nothing to stop me.*

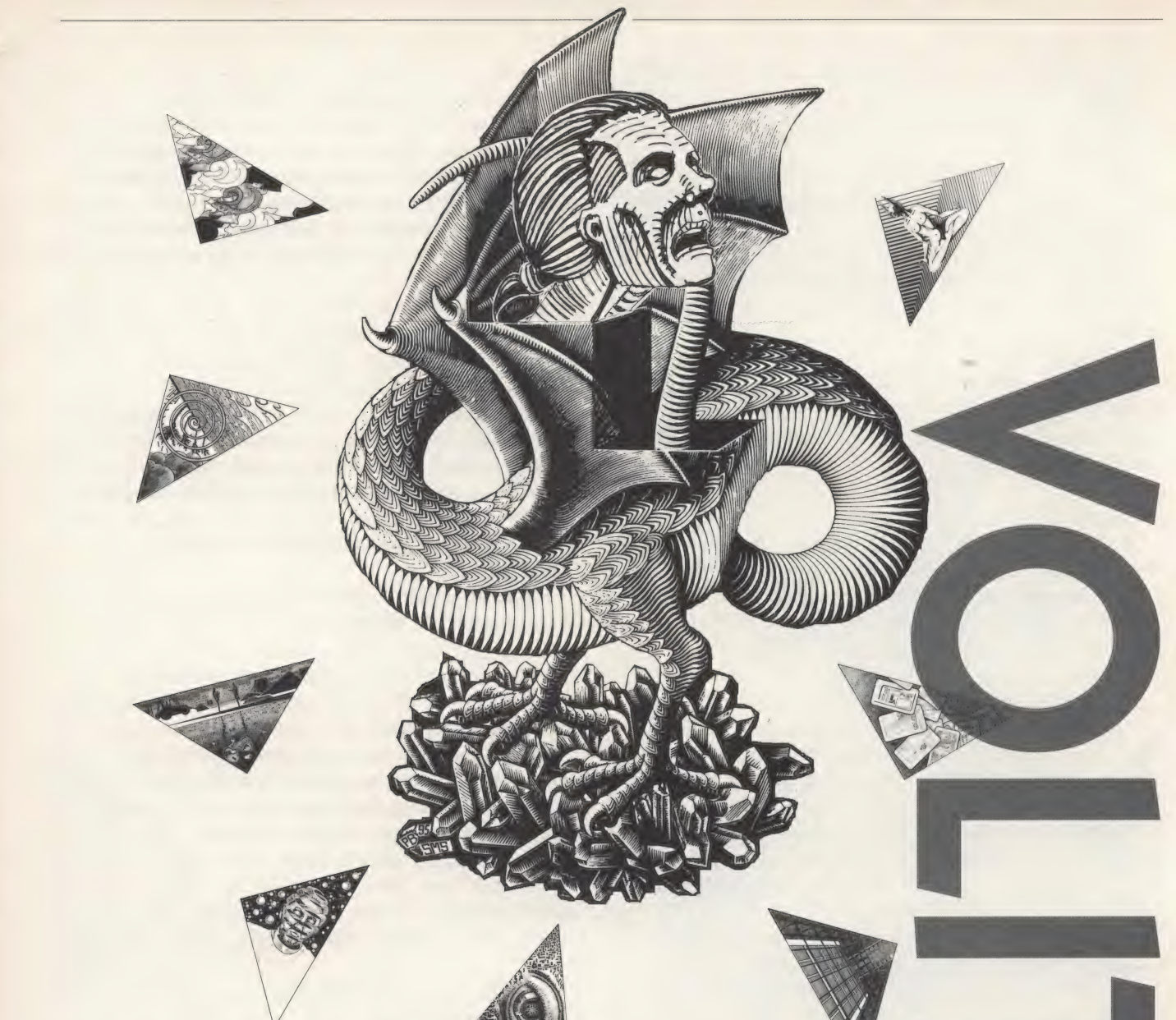
I dry myself, and stare into the mirror, watching as the steamed glass slowly clears. Knowing that I could have pulled the trigger is enough. I've faced the possibility; there's nothing left to prove. It's not the act that's important – one way or the other. What matters is overcoming everything that stands in the way of freedom.

*But next time?*

Next time, I'll do it.

Because I can.





# Mister ZON

**Greg Egan**



I take the patch to Tran, in his battered Redfern terrace full of posters of deservedly obscure Belgian chainsaw bands. He says, "Recursive Visions Introscape 3000. Retail at 35 K."

"I know. I checked."

"Alex! I'm hurt." He smiles, showing acid-etched teeth. Too much throwing up; someone should tell him he's already thin enough.

"So what can you get me?"

"Maybe 18 or 20. But it could take months to find a buyer. If you want it off your hands right now, I'll give you 12."

"I'll wait."

"Suit yourself." I reach out to take it back, but he pulls away. "Don't be so impatient!" He plugs a fibre jack into a tiny socket in the rim, then starts typing on the laptop at the heart of his jury-rigged test bench.

"If you break it, I'll fucking kill you."

He groans. "Yeah, my big clumsy photons might smash some delicate little watch-spring in there."

"You know what I mean. You can still lock it up."

"If you're going to have it for six months, don't you want to know what software it's running?"

I almost choke. "You think I'm going to *use it*? It's probably running some executive stress monitor.

*Blue Monday*: 'Learn to match the colour of the mood display panel with the reference hue beside it, for optimal productivity and total well-being'."

"Don't knock biofeedback till you've tried it. This might even be the premature ejaculation cure you've been searching for."

I thump his scrawny neck, then look over his shoulder at the laptop screen, a blur of scrolling hexadecimal gibberish.

"What exactly are you doing?"

"Every manufacturer reserves a block of codes with the ISO, so remotes can't accidentally trigger the wrong devices. But they use the same ones for cabled stuff, too. So we only have to try the codes Recursive Visions –"

An elegant, marbled-grey interface window appears on the screen. The heading says **Pandemonium**. The only option is a button labelled **Reset**.

Tran turns to me, mouse in hand. "Never heard of *Pandemonium*. Sounds like some kind of psychedelic shit. But if it's read his head, and the evidence is in there..." He shrugs. "I'll have to do it before I sell it, so I might as well do it now."

"Okay."

He fires the button, and a query appears: **Delete stored map, and prepare for a new wearer?** Tran clicks **Yes**.

He says, "Wear and enjoy. No charge."

"You're a saint." I take the patch. "But I'm not going to wear it if I don't know what it does."

He calls up another database, and types **PAN\***. "Ah. No catalogue entry. So – it's black market... unapproved!" He grins at me, like a schoolkid daring another to eat a worm. "But what's the worst it can do?"

"I don't know. Brainwash me?"

"I doubt it. Patches can't show naturalistic images. Nothing strongly representational – and no text. They ran trials with music videos, stock prices, language lessons... but the users kept bumping into things. All they can display now is abstract graphics. How do you brainwash someone with that?"

I raise the thing to my left eye experimentally – but I know it won't even light up until it sticks firmly in place.

Tran says, "Whatever it does... if you think of it information-theoretically, it can't show you anything that isn't there in your skull already."

"Yeah? That much boredom could kill me."

Still, it does seem crazy to waste the opportunity. Anyone with a machine as expensive as this probably paid a small fortune for the software, too – and if it's weird enough to be illegal, it might actually be a buzz.

Tran's losing interest. "It's your decision."

"Exactly."

I hold the patch in place over my eye, and let the rim fuse gently with my skin.

Mira says, "Alex? Aren't you going to tell me?"

"Huh?" I peer at her groggily; she's smiling, but she looks faintly hurt.

"I want to know what it showed you!" She leans over and starts tracing the ridge of my cheekbone with her fingertip – as if she'd like to touch the patch itself, but can't quite bring herself to do that. "What did you see? Tunnels of light? Ancient cities bursting into flame? Silver angels fucking in your brain?"

I remove her hand. "Nothing."

"I don't believe you."

But it's true. No cosmic fireworks; if anything, the patterns became more subdued the more I lost myself in the sex. But the details are elusive – as they usually are, unless I've been making a conscious effort to picture the display.

I try to explain. "Most of the time, I don't see anything. Do you 'see' your nose, your eyelashes? The patch is like that. After the first few hours, the image just... vanishes. It doesn't look like anything real, it doesn't move when you move your head – so your brain realizes it's got nothing to do with the outside world, and starts filtering it out."

Mira is scandalized, as if I've cheated her somehow. "You can't even see what it's showing you? Then... what's the point?"

"You don't *see* the image floating in front of you – but you can still know about it. It's like... there's a neurological condition called blindsight, where people lose all sense of visual awareness – but they can still guess what's in front of them, if they really try, because the information is still coming through –"

"Like clairvoyance. I understand." She fingers the ankh on her neck chain.

"Yeah, it's uncanny. Shine a blue light in my eye... and by some strange magic, I'll know that it's blue."





Mira groans and flops back onto the bed. A car goes by, and the headlights through the curtains illuminate the statue on the bookshelf: a jackal-headed woman in the lotus position, sacred heart exposed beneath one breast. Very hip and syncretic. Mira once told me, deadpan: *This is my soul, passed down from incarnation to incarnation. It used to belong to Mozart – and before that, Cleopatra.* The inscription on the base says Budapest, 2005. But the strangest thing is, they made it like a Russian doll: inside Mira's soul is another soul, and inside that is a third, and a fourth. I said: *This last one's just dead wood. Nothing inside. Doesn't that worry you?*

I concentrate, and try to summon up the image again. The patch constantly measures pupil dilation, and the focal distance of the masked eye's lens – both of which naturally track the unmasked eye – and adjusts the synthetic hologram accordingly. So the image never goes out of focus, or appears too bright, or too dim – whatever the unmasked eye is looking at. No real object could ever behave like that; no wonder the brain shunts the data so readily. Even in the first few hours – when I effortlessly saw the patterns superimposed on everything – they seemed more like vivid mental images than any kind of trick with light. Now, the whole idea that I could “just look” at the hologram and automatically “see it” is ludicrous; the reality is more like groping an object in the dark, and attempting to picture it.

What I picture is: elaborately branched threads of colour, flashing against the greyness of the room – like pulses of fluorescent dye injected into fine veins. The image seems bright, but not dazzling; I can still see into the shadows around the bed. Hundreds of these branched patterns are flashing simultaneously – but most are faint, and very short-lived. Maybe ten or twelve dominate at any given moment – glowing intensely for about half a second each, before they fade and others take over. Sometimes it seems that one of these “strong” patterns passes on its strength directly to a neighbouring pattern, summoning it out of the darkness – and sometimes the two can be seen lit up together, tangled edges entwined. At other times, the strength, the brightness, seems to come out of nowhere – though occasionally I catch two or three subtle cascades in the background, each one alone almost too faint and too rapid to follow, converging on a single pattern and triggering a bright, sustained flash.

The wafer of superconducting circuitry buried in the patch is imaging my entire brain. These patterns *could* be individual neurons – but what would be the point of such a microscopic view? More likely, they're much larger systems – networks of tens of thousands of neurons – and the whole thing is some kind of functional map: connections preserved, but distances rearranged for ease of interpretation. Only a neurosurgeon would care about the actual anatomical locations.

But – exactly which systems am I being shown? And how am I meant to respond to the sight of them?



Most patchware is biofeedback. Measures of stress – or depression, arousal, concentration, whatever – are encoded in the colours and shapes of the graphics. Because the patch image “vanishes,” it's not a distraction – but the information remains accessible. In effect, regions of the brain not naturally wired to “know about” each other are put in touch, allowing them to modulate each other in new ways. Or that's the hype. But biofeedback patchware should make its target clear: there should be some fixed template held up beside the realtime display, showing the result to aim for. All this is showing me is... pandemonium.

Mira says, “I think you better go now.”

The patch image almost vanishes, like a cartoon thought-bubble pricked – but I make an effort, and manage to hang on to it.

“Alex? I think you should go.”

Hairs rise on the back of my neck. I saw... *what?* The same patterns, as she spoke the same words? I struggle to replay the sequence from memory, but the patterns in front of me – the patterns for struggling to remember? – render that impossible. And by the time I let the image fade, it's too late; I don't know what I saw.

Mira puts a hand on my shoulder. “I want you to leave.”

My skin crawls. Even without the image in front of me, I know the same patterns are firing. “*I think you should go.*” “*I want you to leave.*” I'm not seeing the sounds encoded in my brain. I'm seeing the meaning.

And even now, just thinking about the meaning – I *know* that the sequence is being replayed, faintly.

Mira shakes me angrily, and I finally turn to her. “What's your problem? You wanted to screw the patch, and I got in the way?”

“Very funny. Just go.”

I dress slowly, to annoy her. Then I stand by the bed, looking at her thin body hunched beneath the sheets. I think: *I could hurt her badly, if I wanted to. It would be so simple.*

She watches me uneasily. I feel a surge of shame: the truth is, I don't even want to frighten her. But it's too late; I already have.

She lets me kiss her goodbye, but her whole body is rigid with distrust. My stomach churns. *What's happening to me? What am I becoming?*

Out on the street, though, in the cold night air, the lucidity takes hold. *Love, empathy, compassion...* all these obstacles to freedom must be overcome. I need not choose violence – but my choices are meaningless if they're encumbered by social mores and sentimentality, hypocrisy and self-delusion.

Nietzsche understood. Sartre and Camus understood.

I think calmly: *There was nothing to stop me. I could have done anything. I could have broken her neck.* But I chose not to. *I chose.* So how did that happen? How – and where? When I spared the owner of the patch... when I chose not to lay a finger on Mira... in the end, it was my body that acted





one way, not the other – *but where did it all begin?*

If the patch is displaying everything that happens in my brain – or everything that matters: thoughts, meanings, the highest levels of abstraction – then if I'd known how to read those patterns, could I have followed the whole process? *Traced it back to the first cause?*

I halt in mid-step. The idea is vertiginous... and exhilarating. Somewhere deep in my brain, there *must* be the "I": the fount of all action, the self who decides. Untouched by culture, upbringing, genes – the source of human freedom, utterly autonomous, responsible only to itself. I've always known that – but I've been struggling all these years to make it clearer.

If the patch could hold up a mirror to my soul – if I could watch *my own will* reaching out from the centre of my being *as I pulled the trigger* –

It would be a moment of perfect honesty, perfect understanding.

Perfect freedom.

Home, I lie in the dark, bring back the image, experiment. If I'm going to follow the river upstream, I have to map as much territory as I can. It's not easy: monitoring my thoughts, monitoring the patterns, trying to find the links. Am I seeing the patterns

corresponding to the ideas themselves, as I force myself to free-associate? Or am I seeing patterns bound up more with the whole balancing act of attention – between the image itself, and the thoughts which I'm hoping the image reflects?

I turn on the radio, find a talk show – and try to concentrate on the words without letting the patch image slip away. I manage to discern the patterns fired by a few words – or at least, patterns which are common to every cascade which appears when those words are used – but after the fifth or sixth word, I've lost track of the first.

I switch on the light, grab some paper, start trying to sketch a dictionary. But it's hopeless. The cascades happen too fast – and everything I do to try to capture one pattern, to freeze the moment, is an intrusion which sweeps the moment away.

It's almost dawn. I give up, and try to sleep. I'll need money for rent soon, I'll have to do something – unless I take up Tran's offer for the patch. I reach under the mattress and check that the gun's still there.

I think back over the last few years. One worthless degree. Three years unemployed. The safe daytime house jobs. Then the nights. Stripping away layer after layer of illusion. Love, hope, morality... it all has to be overcome. I can't stop now.

And I know how it has to end.

As light begins to penetrate the room, I feel a sudden shift... *in what?* Mood? Perception? I stare up at the narrow strip of sunlight on the crumbling plaster of the ceiling – and nothing looks different, nothing has changed. I scan my body mentally, as if I might be suffering from some kind of pain too unfamiliar to apprehend instantly – but all I get back is the ten-

sion of my own uncertainty and confusion.

The strangeness intensifies – and I cry out involuntarily. I feel as if my skin is bursting, and ten thousand maggots are crawling from the liquid flesh beneath – except that there's nothing to explain this feeling: no vision of wounds, or insects – and absolutely no pain. No itch, no fever, no chilled sweat... nothing. It's like some cold-turkey horror story, some nightmare attack of DTs – but stripped of every symptom save the horror itself.

I swing my legs off the bed and sit up, clutching my stomach – but it's an empty gesture: I don't even want to puke. It's not my guts that are heaving.

I sit and wait for the turmoil to pass.

It doesn't.

I almost tear the patch off – *what else can it be?* – but I change my mind. I want to try something, first. I switch on the radio.

– cyclone warning for the north-west coast –

The ten thousand maggots flow and churn; the words hit them like the blast from a firehose. I slam the radio off, stilling the upheaval – and then the words echo in my brain:

– cyclone –

The cascade runs a loop around the concept, firing off the patterns for the sound itself; a faint vision of the written word; an image abstracted from a hundred satellite weather maps; news footage of wind-blown palms – and more, much more, too much to grasp.

– cyclone warning –

Most "warning" patterns were already firing, prepared by the context, anticipating the obvious. The patterns for the height-of-the-storm news footage strengthen, and trigger others for morning-after images of people outside damaged homes.

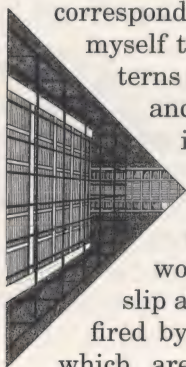
– north-west coast –

The pattern for the satellite weather map *tightens*, focusing its energy on one remembered – or constructed – image where the swirl of clouds is correctly placed. Patterns fire for the names of half a dozen north-west towns, and images of tourist spots... until the cascade trails away into vague associations with spartan rural simplicity.

And I understand what's happening. (Patterns fire for *understand*, patterns fire for *patterns*, patterns fire for *confused*, *overwhelmed*, *insane*...)

The process damps down, slightly (patterns fire for all these concepts). *I can grasp this calmly, I can see it through* (patterns fire). I sit with my head against my knees (patterns fire) trying to focus my thoughts enough to cope with all the resonances and associations which the patch (patterns fire) keeps showing me through my not-quite-seeing left eye.

There was never any need to do the impossible: to sit down and draw a dictionary on paper. In the last ten days, the patterns have etched their own dictionary into my brain. No need to observe and remember, consciously, which pattern corresponds to which thought; I've spent every waking moment exposed to exactly those associations – and they've burned





themselves into my synapses from sheer repetition.

And now it's paying off. I don't need the patch to tell me merely what I'd tell myself I'm thinking – but now it's showing me all the rest: all the details too faint and fleeting to capture with mere introspection. Not the single, self-evident stream of consciousness – the sequence defined by the strongest pattern at any moment – but all the currents and eddies churning beneath.

The whole chaotic process of thought.

The pandemonium.

Speaking is a nightmare. I practice alone, talking back to the radio, too unsteady to risk even a phone call until I can learn not to seize up, or veer off track.

I can barely open my mouth without sensing a dozen patterns for words and phrases *rising to the opportunity*, competing for the chance to be spoken – and the cascades which should have zeroed in on one choice in a fraction of a second (they must have, before, or the whole process would never have worked) are kept buzzing inconclusively by the very fact that I've become so aware of all the alternatives. After a while, I learn to suppress this feedback – at least enough to avoid paralysis. But it still feels very strange.

I switch on the radio. A talk-back caller says: "Wasting taxpayers' money on rehabilitation is just admitting that we didn't keep them in long enough."

Cascades of patterns flesh out the bare sense of the words with a multitude of associations and connections... but they're *already* entwined with cascades building possible replies, invoking their own associations.

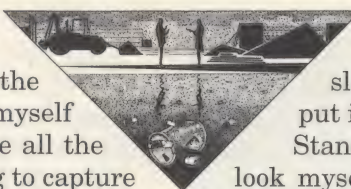
I respond as rapidly as I can: "Rehabilitation is cheaper. And what are you suggesting – locking people up until they're too senile to re-offend?" As I speak, the patterns for the chosen words flash triumphantly – while those for 20 or 30 other words and phrases are only now fading... as if hearing what I've actually said is the only way they can be sure that they've lost their chance to be spoken.

I repeat the experiment, dozens of times, until I can "see" all the alternative reply-patterns clearly. I watch them spinning their elaborate webs of meaning across my mind, in the hope of being chosen.

But... *chosen where, chosen how?*

It's still impossible to tell. If I try to slow the process down, my thoughts seize up completely – but if I manage to get a reply out, there's no real hope of following the dynamics. A second or two later, I can still "see" most of the words and associations which were triggered along the way... but trying to trace the decision for what was finally spoken back to its source – *back to my self* – is like trying to allocate blame in a thousand-car pile-up from a single blurred time-exposure of the whole event.

I decide to rest for an hour or two. (Somehow, I decide.) The feeling of decomposing into a squirming heap of larvae has lost its edge – but I can't shut down my awareness of the pandemonium completely. I



could try taking off the patch – but it doesn't seem worth the risk of a long slow process of re-acclimatization when I put it back on.

Standing in the bathroom, shaving, I stop to look myself in the eye. *Do I want to go through with this? Watch my mind in a mirror while I kill a stranger? What would it change? What would it prove?*

It would prove that there's a spark of freedom inside me which no one else can touch, no one else can claim. It would prove that I'm finally responsible for everything I do.

I feel something rising up in the pandemonium. Something emerging from the depths. I close both eyes, steady myself against the sink – then I open them, and gaze into both mirrors again.

And I finally see it, superimposed across the image of my face: an intricate, stellated pattern, like some kind of luminous benthic creature, sending delicate threads out to touch ten thousand words and symbols – all the machinery of thought at its command. It hits me with a jolt of *déjà vu*: I've been "seeing" this pattern for days. Whenever I thought of myself as a subject, an actor. Whenever I reflected on the power of the will. Whenever I thought back to the moment when I almost pulled the trigger ...

I have no doubt, this is it. *The self that chooses. The self that's free.*

I catch my eye again, and the pattern streams with light – not at the mere sight of my face, but at the sight of myself watching, and knowing that I'm watching – and knowing that I could turn away, at any time.

I stand and stare at the wondrous thing. *What do I call this? "I"? "Alex"? Neither really fits; their meaning is exhausted.* I hunt for the word, the image, which gives the strongest response. My own face in the mirror, from the outside, invokes barely a flicker – but when I *feel* myself sitting nameless in the dark cave of the skull – looking out through the eyes, controlling the body... *making the decisions, pulling the strings...* the pattern blazes with recognition.

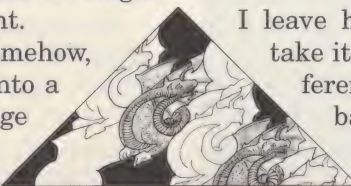
I whisper, "Mister Volition. That's who I am."

My head begins to throb. I let the patch image fade from vision.

As I finish shaving, I examine the patch from the outside, for the first time in days. The dragon breaking out of its own insubstantial portrait to attain solidity – or at least, portrayed that way. I think of the man I stole it from, and I wonder if he ever saw into the pandemonium as deeply as I have.

But he can't have – or he never would have let me take the patch. Because now that I've glimpsed the truth, I know I'd defend the power to see it this way, to the death.

I leave home around midnight, scout the area, take its pulse. Every night there are subtly different flows of activity between the clubs, the bars, the brothels, the gambling houses, the private parties. It's not the crowds I'm after, though. I'm looking for a





place where no one has reason to go.

I finally choose a construction site, flanked by deserted offices. There's a patch of ground protected from the two nearest street lights by a large skip near the road, casting a black triangular umbra. I sit on the dew-wet sand – and cement dust – gun and balaclava in my jacket within easy reach.

I wait calmly. I've learnt to be patient – and there are nights when I've faced the dawn empty-handed. Most nights, though, someone takes a shortcut. Most nights, someone gets lost.

I listen for footsteps, but I let my mind wander. I try to follow the pandemonium more closely, seeing if I can absorb the sequence of images passively, while I'm thinking of something else – and then replay the memory, the movie of my thoughts.

I make a fist, then open it. I make a fist, then... don't. I try to catch Mister Volition in the act, exercising my powers of whim. Reconstructing what I think I "saw", the thousand-tendrilled pattern certainly flashes brightly – but memory plays strange tricks: I can't get the sequence right. Every time I run the movie in my head, I see most of the other patterns involved in the action flashing *first* – sending cascades converging on Mister Volition, making *it* fire – the very opposite of what I know is true. Mister Volition lights up the instant I feel myself choose... so how can anything but mental static precede that pivotal moment?

I practice for more than an hour, but the illusion persists. Some distortion of temporal perception? Some side-effect of the patch?

*Footsteps approaching.*  
*One person.*

I slip on the balaclava, wait a few seconds. Then I rise slowly to a crouch, and sneak a look around the edge of the skip. He's passed it, and he's not looking back.

I follow. He's walking briskly, hands in jacket pockets. When I'm three metres behind him – close enough to discourage most people from making a run – I call out softly: "Halt."

He glances back over his shoulder first, then wheels around. He's young, 18 or 19, taller than me and probably stronger. I'll have to watch out for any dumb bravado. He doesn't quite rub his eyes, but the balaclava always seems to produce an expression of disbelief. That, and the air of calm: when I fail to wave my arms and scream Hollywood obscenities, some people can't quite bring themselves to accept that it's real.

I move closer. He's wearing a diamond stud in one ear. Tiny, but better than nothing. I point to it, and he hands it over. He looks grim, but I don't think he's going to try anything stupid.

"Take out your wallet, and show me what's in it."

He does this, fanning the contents for inspection like a hand of cards. I choose the e-cash, e for easily hacked; I can't read the balance, but I slip it in my pocket and let him keep the rest.

"Now take off your shoes."

He hesitates, and lets a flash of pure resentment show in his eyes. Too afraid to answer back, though. He complies clumsily, standing on one foot at a time. I don't blame him: I'd feel more vulnerable, sitting. Even if it makes no difference at all.

While I tie the shoes by their laces to the back of my belt, one-handed, he looks at me as if he's trying to judge whether I understand that he has nothing else to offer – trying to decide if I'm going to be disappointed, and angry. I gaze back at him, not angry at all, just trying to fix his face in my memory.

For a second, I try to visualize the pandemonium – but there's no need. I'm reading the patterns entirely on their own terms now – taking them in, and understanding them fully, through the new sensory channel which the patch has carved out for itself from the neurobiology of vision.

And I know that Mister Volition is firing.

I raise the gun to the stranger's heart, and click off the safety. His composure melts, his face screws up. He starts shaking, and tears appear, but he doesn't close his eyes. I feel a surge of compassion – and "*see*" it, too – but it's outside Mister Volition, and only Mister Volition can choose.

The stranger asks simply, pitifully, "Why?"  
"Because I can."

He closes his eyes, teeth chattering, a thread of mucus dangling from one nostril. I wait for the moment of lucidity, the moment of perfect understanding, the moment I step outside the flow of the world and take responsibility for myself.

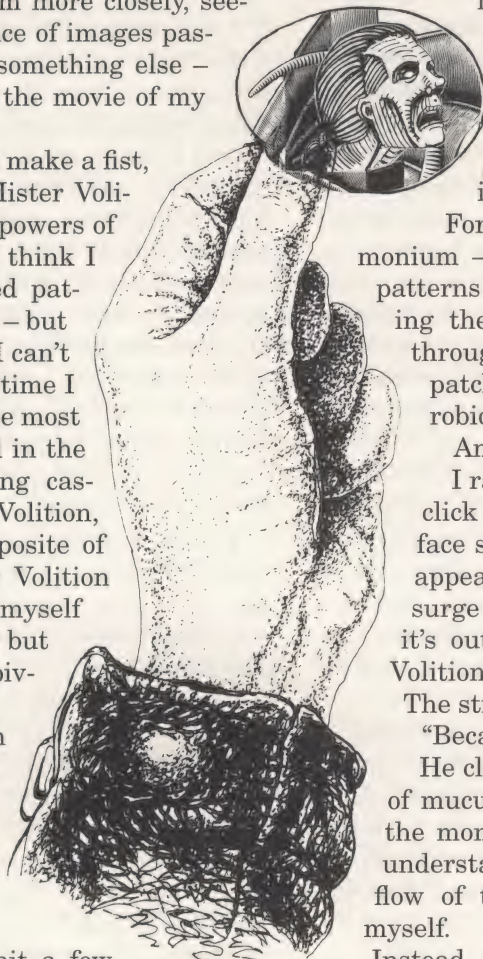
Instead, a different veil parts – and the pandemonium shows itself to itself, in every detail:

The patterns for the concepts of *freedom*, *self-knowledge*, *courage*, *honesty*, *responsibility* are all firing brightly. They're spinning cascades – vast tangled streamers hundreds of patterns long – but now, all the connections, all the causal relationships, are finally crystal clear.

And nothing is flowing out of any fount of action, any irreducible, autonomous self. Mister Volition is firing – but it's just one more pattern among thousands, one more elaborate cog. It taps into the cascades around it with a dozen tentacles and jabbers wildly, "I I I" – claiming responsibility for everything – but in truth, it's no different from any of the rest.

My throat emits a retching sound, and my knees almost buckle. *This is too much to know, too much to accept.* Still holding the gun firmly in place, I reach up under the balaclava and tear off the patch.

It makes no difference. The shows plays on. The brain has internalized all the associations, all the





connections – and the meaning keeps unfolding, relentlessly.

*There is no first cause in here, no place where decisions can begin.* Just a vast machine of vanes and turbines, driven by the causal flow which passes through it – a machine built out of words made flesh, images made flesh, ideas made flesh.

*There is nothing else: only these patterns, and the connections between them.* “Choices” happen everywhere – in every association, every linkage of ideas. The whole structure, the whole machine, “decides.”

*And Mister Volition?* Mister Volition is nothing but the idea of itself. The pandemonium can imagine anything: Santa Claus, God... the human soul. It can build a symbol for any idea, and wire it up to a thousand others – but that doesn't mean that the thing the symbol represents could ever be real.

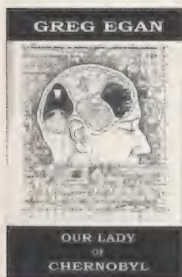
I stare in horror and pity and shame at the man trembling in front of me. *Who am I sacrificing him to?* I could have told Mira: *One little soul doll is one too many.* So why couldn't I tell myself? There is no second self inside the self, no inner puppeteer to pull the strings and make the choices. There is only the whole machine.

And under scrutiny, the jumped-up cog is shriveling. Now that the pandemonium can see itself completely, Mister Volition makes no sense at all.

There is nothing, no one to kill for: no emperor in the mind to defend to the death. And there are no barriers to freedom to be overcome – love, hope, morality... tear all that beautiful machinery down, and there'd be nothing left but a few nerve cells twitching at random – not some radiant purified unencumbered *Übermensch*. The only freedom lies in being this machine, and not another.

So this machine lowers the gun, raises a hand in a clumsy gesture of contrition, turns, and flees into the night. Not stopping for breath – and wary as ever of the danger of pursuit – but crying tears of liberation all the way.

**Author's Note:** This story was inspired by the “pandemonium” cognitive models of Marvin Minsky, Daniel C. Dennett, and others. However, the rough sketch I've presented here is only intended to convey a general sense of how these models work; it doesn't begin to do justice to the fine points. Detailed models are described in *Consciousness Explained* by Dennett, and *The Society of Mind* by Minsky.



Greg Egan's most recent story here was “Mitochondrial Eve” (issue 92), and his most recent book is the collection *Axiomatic* (1995). He lives in Perth, Australia. We have another, longer story by him scheduled for the issue after next.

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# Art and Met Party-Time

(Location: late-evening party in Southampton, summer of 1995. Music, laughter, clinking bottles. Present: SMS, Jason Hurst, Andy Robertson, many others.)

**Let's get this interview going with a question everybody asks: why do you use the initials "SMS" instead of your full name?**

Dammit, if I'd been looking for an elegant soubriquet I *wouldn't* have come up with anything so unwieldy as three initials. It's simply a hangover from when I and a friend tried to take over our college magazine as (mysteriously) "NB and SS." All our illos and most of the other articles were drawn by "SMS." This simply became a usefully vague byline, used in conjunction with pseudonyms like "Peter Croft" when I was squatting and generally meeting the police a lot in London. By the time I returned to Hampshire the thing had stuck. I guess I'm just glad I'm not stuck with "Peter Croft," because *his* signature is a lot more time-consuming.

**Where and when were you born?**

"A very good place to start..." The answer, sadly, is just around the corner from where I now live: Southampton maternity ward, on 17th August 1959. Until the age of six I was lucky enough to live in what I've since been told was a "shed," but which I was brought up to believe was a bungalow, just outside the country town of Romsey. A superb place to have an early childhood: one-and-a-half acres of garden with sheds full of rusting metalwork, a tram in the garden — my own *Tardis* — and easy access to derelict traction engines. We also had chickens, rabbits in an old Anderson shelter, pigs, cows over the fence, and a dog



and cat. We killed 'em all. Country ways: simple pleasures, happy days.

**Did you have, ah... odd parents, then?**

They seem to have been identified as "characters," though I never saw it that way. My father was an ex-naval printer's reader and committed cyclist, my mother was a ward sister who was crippled by a motorcycle accident. They met at the Young Communist League as he was mending his bike; all very *Look Back in Anger*... but perhaps I'm romanticizing. Certainly, they were superb parents: they brought me up to read, draw, climb, polish shoes, tell the time, respect the police and kill chickens before I went to school. They explained things readily

and sent me to Sunday school — though they weren't Christians (when it was virtually compulsory in small villages) — until I started arguing with the nuns about dinosaurs. Nuns don't take kindly to dinosaurs...

**It sounds like an unusual childhood.**

I think it became more unusual between the ages of six and 18, when we moved to a nursing home run by my mum: three storeys of Victorian mock-tudor Gothic folly (with, yes, tower section, gables and cellars) set in three acres on the edge of the New Forest. The first thing we did when we moved in was kill an acre of brambles, graduated to a patient's poodle, and then people... and laying 'em out. Every patient a nutter (only one suicide... but sharing a room with her husband gave it class) and every nurse with interesting personality defects (sex education came as a confusing rush, helping with a nurse's "non-existent" childbirth). I never understood why my friends wouldn't stay the night, but now I can see that with a nickname like "Dracula's Castle," a resident ghost (in spite of my *Time Bandits*-style vigils, I never saw it), and my mother hobbling around on her stick wearing a matron's uniform and a manic smile in between suicide threats ... yes, maybe it was a little unusual. You don't realize these things as a kid.

Actually, it was a bloody marvellous childhood in the main. Not everyone gets to cut loose for days on end in the New Forest without "having to go home for tea." It's sad that childhoods like that are now only to be found in William books, Dennis Potter plays (without the simulated sex) and among the Very Rich. I'm sure it'll all be available on VR soon, but it'll have a "Spielberg" gloss ... less mud and



# aphysics at

*SMS interviewed by  
Andy Robertson and Jason Hurst*

fewer stinging nettles, and it'll cost a bit on the Key Metre.

## **So what led you from childhood to now?**

"There followed a tale of horror in which suicides, divorce, bent solicitors, life on the streets of London, academia (degree in philosophy, Southampton University), left-wing and underground politics, loss of children and the need to plant more trees featured largely. We made our excuses and left."

## **We'll take that as read, then. Did you come to illustration via science fiction, or to science fiction via illustration?**

Chicken or egg, etc... I'm told I once asked "How do you draw fish?" — and I was told, "We have a fishtank. Go look!" I'm sure there's more to it than that, but I was very young at the time. I seemed to spend some years standing in corridors, because I was drawing other kids' "What I did on my weekend" pictures, and a lot of illustrations for supposed books. By the time I was 13 I was banned from doing "O"-level art because I kept asking why we had to do Cubism when it was never explained to us. This was a damned good move because it introduced me to Paul Worsley, who drove to school in an orange jeep, had long hair and an Afghan, and, instead of saying "Drawing spaceships is silly," said, "Yes, Chris Foss is amazing; how does he do it?" We spent a lot of spare time building spaceships out of scrap. He obviously had a Bad Attitude too, because they got rid of him within the year.

Damn! I'm veering into autobiography. OK, I was actually *trying* to be a science-fiction writer until the need for "stability" made me take refuge in university (but that sounds silly in summary). There I expected to work

towards a day job, until I met Simon Meacock and Chris Brasted who were producing *Mad Dog* (a small-press, "underground" comic zine). I sent them a fan letter with a strip I'd drawn on Geriatric Night Duty, and by the time the bugger came out I had become an editor of the magazine by default. It was all downhill from there, really.

## **So the link was comic strips?**

Yup. Words, via words-and-pictures to pictures. Golly, it's odd: I've not tried to draw a "Foss" spaceship since I left school...

## **You have done a fair number of comic strips for people like Marvel and 2000 A.D., and your first strip for *Interzone*, "Screaming of the**

**Beetle," did top the popularity poll back in 1987. Do you want to explore the "words" angle further?** The main impetus has been to tell stories. Comic strips are a poor man's way to make films (or TV). So the simple answer is, yes, I would like to do more words with pictures.

**Without wanting to flatter you, I think you're the most interesting sf artist – not necessarily technically, though you are good – and your work has that true sf "feel." Am I the only one who says this?** Gosh! Thanks! Most illustrators are very sad lonely people who can't come out to play due to deadlines, and so only have friends who say, "You're bloody brilliant," because you're the only person they know who can draw.



Photograph: Paul Brazier



It's flattering, but bollocks. But from you that's a very real compliment. It means I've managed to find the visuals which are in the stories.

**So, when you're illustrating for *Interzone*, you read the stories all the way through?**

Of course — doesn't everyone? That's where you have to find the pictures.

**I'm pretty sure some artists don't.**

Hmm, I know what you mean. All too many illustrations are an excuse for the artist to draw what he draws best, or what he has in his photo-file — which usually involves lots of faces. I have a vast list of things I'd love to draw, but they don't always fit the story.

**Which kind of stories do you most enjoy illustrating?**

Quite simply, the ones with the best pictures. I'm really keen to cut loose and draw all that spaceship-and-alien bunkum that attracted me to sf in the first place. One of the least appropriate stories I've had to do for *Interzone* was when Dave decided to honour me by assigning me a J. G. Ballard tale about a man alone in his house ["The Enormous Space," *IZ* 30]. Great honour, but I think it would have been better assigned to someone with a photo-library of interior décor. It *did* come out OK, but I'd rather have illustrated a trashy thing about space-rangers. At the other end of the scale must be a Storm Constantine story ["Priest of Hands," *IZ* 58]. That lass is a very visual writer and the whole thing simply dripped with detail and imagery: architecture, clothes, arcane technology, the lot. Usually, you go through a script and underline any interesting visuals. That particular script simply got underlined from the first to last word; the problem was deciding what to leave out.

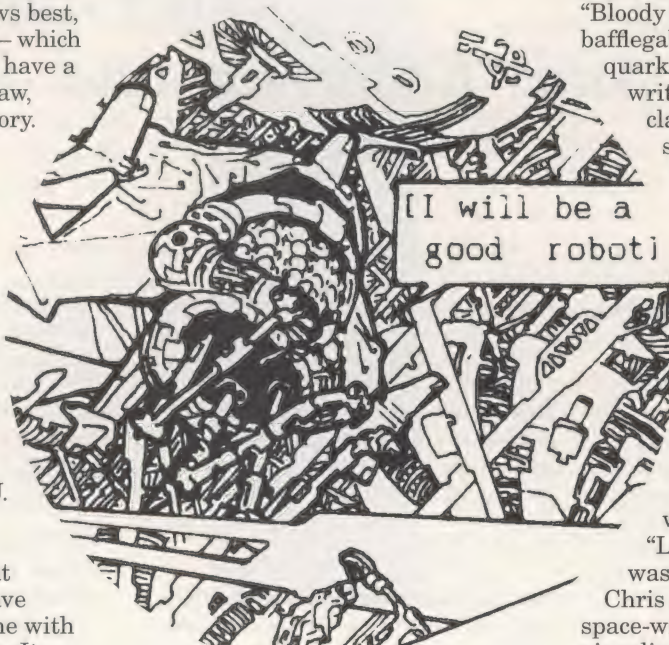
**You do seem to have a thing about architecture...**

So many buildings, so little time.

**How do you decide what to leave out?**

Gallingly, illustrations are there to help the story — not the other way round. This means spacing the pictures so they appear near the appropriate text; which all too often means you have to find pictures from the first two-thirds of the story, where there's really little of interest, and then only use one of the dozens of possible pictures from the end, where the writer has actually written something worth drawing. Worst is where the only interesting images are

ones that will give away the twist ending. Holdstock's "Merlin's Wood" [*IZ* 84] was one of the most difficult from this point of view: I *could* have drawn a nude woman transforming into a werewolf, which would have looked superb and been good fun; as it was, to do that would have left the reader thinking, "I'll read the werewolf story now," and all the personality development would have been wasted. Result: I drew a lot of moody scenery.



**You do have a reputation for attention to correct detail.**

Thanks. If it's supposed to be credible, bullshit in images is as transparent as in words. I think my local library has me pegged down as a transsexual weapons fanatic with an urge to travel, since I keep taking out military hardware, fashion and travel books. At a recent sf convention a Russian arms dealer saw a cover I'd done for an Aldiss book. "Aha!" he said in one of his rare moments of lucidity, "Russian police helicopter." I think he was the first person to identify the type.

You can be sure tons of reference material will turn up as soon as you've finished the picture — which is too damn late. A galling example of this was ostriches, for a Paul Di Filippo story ["Walt and Emily," *IZ* 77-78]. No problem finding ostriches, is there? But not if you have to draw the buggers. I spent ages trolling through three county libraries (and they were very helpful), but no bloody ostriches! Not even in the entire *National Geographic* collection. Incredible, huh? Of course, after the deadline they were lolloping all over the media.

**But though that may be relevant in present-day or near-future stories, it doesn't apply to advanced or alien images, does it?**

It's tricky getting reference material for 22nd-century kit or xenomorphic ickiness, true. But then, at that stage, you're dealing in sculpture: stuff that hits the right buttons in the trashbin of the universal unconscious. It has to *look* right. If it *was* right, I'd send the drawings to NASA, not to a publisher. The thing has to say to the reader, "Bloody big super starship" or "Wizzo bafflegab modulator for sharpening quarks." The laws of physics rarely write in and complain. The

classic example of this must be spaceships: in the 1930s they were thought of as vacuum-going ocean liners. The artists — like the writers — extended known technology and ended up with reworkings of Cunard posters ... with portholes. Anything technical had to *look* technical; hence, ruddy great valves and condensers. Ironically, when I was 13 or so, I bought the whole E. E. "Doc" Smith "Lensman" series because it was the only way to get those Chris Foss covers of late-70s space-wrecks. In reading the books I visualized the whole thing in Foss terms. Only years later did I realize that the stories should really have been visualized with big torpedo-things with wings, portholes and rivets. I don't think Doc Smith ever wrote to his publishers saying, "This is crap; I want my spaceships to look more like a freeway pile-up." Dammit, some years later I illustrated a cod-1930s book for Brian Aldiss and I realized, "These artists are good!" Any Foss, Jim Burns or Peter Elson spaceships would have looked incomprehensible to the then readership.

**You seem to be implying that sf illustration is determined by culture rather than science. Isn't that a little simplistic?**

Sure. But our culture is inescapably informed by science. Whether most people view science as techno-fetish objects, or actually understand how their fridge works, it has an imagery which is culturally determined. Scientific functionalism gives us new images like steam engines or the Lunar Landing Module, but semiotics gets its sticky little fingers on everything and makes it look "more scientific." This can result in all 1950s technology becoming "streamlined," from cars to toasters; in the Bohr Atom representing atomic power; or in hi-fi looking like military hardware



in the late 70s, “style” boxes in the 80s, or rounded in the 90s.

**I would have thought that sf imagery was rather above current fashion.**

Science-fiction imagery simply projects the dominant iconography, so that it dates, if anything, just as quickly. Even more fun is the fact that, as sf has been part of our culture so long, it's become a cultural undercurrent; so it's kind of cute that architecture by Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller or Lloyd Wright is still called “Futuristic” and makes its way to locations for TV sf when it's really early 20th-century. This makes sf a terrifically kitsch “dressing-up box” of past dreams and nightmares we've grown out of. It's perfect post-structuralist fodder. Whenever Channel 4 give us an sf season they play this game well. Phrases like “Big Brother,” “Brave New World,” “Space Invaders,” “Dalek” and “Tardis” are part of standard journalese and pub conversation, though their origins are often unknown. This can put sf fans in a dodgy position, as they *know* what these things mean and yet seem to be unaware that mainstream culture has hijacked their symbolism for crisp adverts and raves. A lovely example here is a recent video-magazine cover of a bimbo with totally unconvincing “space clothes,” ray-gun and jetpack. It's gorgeous! Let's not con ourselves here: we have all seen the future... and it smirks.

**I can't help wondering how this squares with your work on Steampunk and “period” sf stories; one thing I like is that you seem to have infused them with a certain authenticity, you seem very informed about sf history...**

It's playing the same post-structuralist game as the writer. It's marvellous fun! You try to find a style and design that fits the story. With Stableford's “Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires” [IZ 91-92] this meant *The Strand* and Sydney Paget-type ink-washes. With Baxter's “Ant-Men of Tibet” [IZ 95] it was back to 1920s boys' adventure books. Again, you have to build a “future” in period, which means forgetting about the ones you know about after that period. One nice confirmation of this was when my girlfriend saw the vampires' city; she said, “That looks like Manchester!” — which is confirmation that I *had* done

a Super-City of the 1900s prior to Gropius and Berg's use of girders and concrete ... which is pretty much what Manchester is. Another nice thing is that when I designed a “steam carriage” for the extract from Sterling and Gibson's *The Difference Engine* [IZ 40] I later found an old illustration — “A steam carriage”: dammit, the same answers to the same design questions! Even nicer is that Bruce Sterling bought the illos later!

**So even in a period piece technical details matter to you?**

There's a lot of cod-Victoriana around, which is fine for a laugh, but you get a better chuckle out of showing science *working* in a period, rather than this “previous-generations-were-idiots” aesthetic. There's no real sense of period in those awful “Captain Nemo” films of the 70s. Rivets do not a Victorian engine make, nor iron bars a gauge. George Pal's ghastly *Time Machine* movie, aside from “updating” the thing to a 50s Yank-Victorian mess, has this fellow build a prototype with ornate scrollwork and a fitted leather cushion. Again, it's a shorthand for the period but not terribly credible really. I mean, “Good day, ironmonger; I'd like a casing for my prototype time machine if you please.” “Certainly, sir. We have them in ormolu or meerschaum.” Total bollocks! For the *Interzone* story “Chronotetannymenicon” (hard to say whilst drunk!), more practical was to give a scientist state-of-the-art Faraday lab equipment [IZ 76]. Probably the worst “Victoriana” I remember were the awful illustra-

tions to Jeff Wayne's *War of the Worlds*. The war machines, aside from not being tripods, were all white hydraulics and streamlined lines. This story only makes sense in an Edwardian context, and here we have a NASA landing craft on Horsell Common!

**I would agree that much sf is self-reflexive; but what about hard sf imagery?**

Certainly, no-nonsense technology does tend to lack design, so Calder Hall looks pretty similar to a coal-fired power station. But even then we can usually tell the difference, and it's these differences that are highlighted by sf illustration to make the point. Whatever you draw, it has to be designed — to “look as if it works” in the scientific and cultural context. For most sf illustration this is a sort of stylized shorthand of the snazziest tech around at the time. It's a while since we saw many spinning computer-discs on covers, but all the best people are plugged into some sort of modem. When I first saw *2001* it was *real*. Last time I saw it, it was because I wanted to see nostalgic 60s tech. Nowadays, our visual shorthand for the future is still *Blade Runner* and *Mad Max*. *The Andromeda Strain* is fine hard sf, but now so many of us work in places like that — we wonder what happens when one of those servo-mechanisms blows, so we tend to believe in the *Nostromo* instead ... because we no longer believe in fail-safe instrumentation. Whatever the technology or biology you draw, it'll have a semiotic resonance; and so, again, you're down to designing nifty shapes and hitting cultural red





buttons. Peter Jones does this with humour and Jim Burns does it with humour and technical brilliance. I'm trying to push a few buttons too. For example: in "What Continues, What Fails," you imply a fusion of mechanicals and biotech with rounded consoles and some pot-plants; in "Yellow Snow" you imply no-nonsense tachyon-smashing gizmos by bunging together some of the machines at CERN ... which look a bit like gas-fired generators really...

**Hmm... I feel dissatisfied by this, but have to acknowledge that you seem to be right.**

This sounds a bit like a Platonic dialogue suddenly...

**OK, I'll continue in the "Glaucón" role with this: I'd rather hoped that sf illustration should be able to go beyond human categories to articulate trans-human images. You seem to be implying that only mathematics can achieve this. So where does that leave sf illustration? Redundant? (Get out of that!)** "What language does god speak? Mathematics." Rowney doesn't have an acrylic for the Noumena. The *really* tricky thing is that if some artist managed to draw something beyond our cultural references, we'd only be capable of perceiving it within our own context – like Aztecs seeing mounted conquistadors as centaurs. In that sense, if the Victorians were to see those NASA hydraulics they'd see steam-pistons, and they'd see Geiger's *Alien* as a giant ant. We're a long way from Locke's passive empiricism aren't we?

**Arthur C. Clarke's "all sufficiently advanced technology will be indistinguishable from magic." So you've talked yourself out of a job.** It's a great let-out for crap sf writers and UFO buffs. Spielberg interprets alien visitors as lost family figures, and Whitley Strieber makes them intelligible through S&M and repressed childhood abuse.

But it no more leaves illustrators out of a meaningful job than writers; each feed off the other as synthesis, and *do* develop part of the culture. *That's* the let-out clause: every new sf vision is a sort of Contemporary Culture on Speed. It may be talking gibberish, but it feeds back to the culture itself and so allows us to have things like the Warnock Committee and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in our universe of discourse. Oh dear, this is a great let-out for crap artists. If sf just recycles the same old dross without humour, or any awareness of its host culture, it just becomes sterile self-deception; but *with* them it can be quite exciting stuff. Every input is an intrusion of the alien. A lovely

example is that in 1797 James Hetherington wore the first top hat in public and was charged with causing a breach of the peace for "appearing on the public highway wearing a tall structure of shining lustre and calculated to disturb those of a timid disposition." Women fainted! Within a couple of decades the top hat was *de rigueur*.

To put it blandly, we can't relate to the Noumena; but alien input enlarges our universe of discourse. When I was about ten, I was staggered by Josh Kirby's cover for *The Aliens Among Us* and designing aliens has never been the same since. In this sense, gosh! the aliens are amongst us... and, thank God... some of the bastards can draw!

**To lighten matters, what the devil is "Phlosque"?**

It's been around for longer than I know. In a curry house in Liverpool, I asked Chris Bell, Dave Barratt, Tom Abba and Eira what we should call the bugger, 'cos it had been bothering me for a while. Everyone knew what it was, and my suggestion of "Phlosque" was passed as appropriate. Phlosque is what sells in sf circles and "Head" shops. It's cosmic kitsch "with Significance" – often dragons, unicorns or dolphins. When we presented the first Phlosque Award, some people thought it was an insult for bad artwork. It ain't. Some of the best artwork is Phlosque, but if you take it so seriously that you think it's above the Phlosque Award you're terminally sad. Simply: fuck 'em if they can't take a joke. I'm pretty smug about this neologism, because Chris tells me people are now writing to fanzines about how they've known the word for years. For more details on the semiotics of



Phlosque, I think I'm doing a lecture on the thing next Eastercon. Dammit. Expect blood.

**Finally, some bread-and-butter questions. Who are your favourite sf writers?**

Heck, it's the end of the 20th century and you want a shortlist of writers? I'm going to regret this brevity. But Philip K. Dick makes sense. Orwell, for clarity. Iain Banks for humour that isn't cloying. Nigel Kneale, Robert Holmes and Chris Boucher are craftsmen in a killing discipline. Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman can make comics exciting again. James Tiptree, Jr wrote "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death," which combines keen biology and Dylan Thomas in an elegant love poem. Tove Jansson [the Finnish children's fantasist] does good existential literature. Tom Stoppard remembered how to be God by the time he co-wrote *Brazil*. Enough?

**You've mentioned a few artists so far. Are there any others you've found influential?**

This is the thing, isn't it? Almost every artist has spent his life becoming too damned good. Rather than go into a tedious list, I'd just rather hope that anyone I've been impressed by enough to try to rip off is in there somewhere – in ameliorated form. It's the sincerest form of flattery so long as you don't actually *copy* their art. It's damned arrogant to pretend that you invented anything yourself, and a bit simplistic to assume that you can trace where all those lines came from. This is where I argue with Jason Hurst: I call it "ripping off," he calls it "homage." To me, homage is where you copy someone's art with acknowledgements, like doing a "Last Supper in Space." To actually copy anyone's art as your own is simply beneath contempt (face it, the other guy can do it better) but if you admit that someone else gave you the impetus, it's a valid – and maybe humbling – learning experience. Perhaps it will all add up to something else that someone else uses too. Culture, like biology, is all shagging 'n' eating.

**What are your future plans?**

Having had all *present* plans (including the work for this *Interzone*) short-circuited by the Death of a Daddy, I can now get back to sorting the inherited mess out. I'm looking forward to a nice cycle-ride to scatter my Dad's ashes, and *then* it's time to get back to silly little projects like honouring my promise to do summat for *Mad Dog* (which I'm reliably informed is coming out again after a decade!) and trying to find somewhere that wants a serious hardcore sf strip. I hope I'll be able to do a strip for *Interzone* some time, and plant another few trees.



There was an address in the contact magazine but I still had difficulty finding the club. There was no name, only a peeling green door that you would think belonged to the Chinese butcher shop. I found the number: 88; drop-shadowed gilt numerals in a fan-light. Peeling, like the green door. Beneath it was painted the four-petalled yin-yang. That told me more than the address or the number that I had found what I was looking for.

Through the fan-light I could see the stairs.

I walked past. I could hear my heart. I thought that only happened in thrillers. My breath was shivering. I wanted to throw up. I must throw up. I didn't. I walked past. Too many people around. They don't know you, I told myself. No one knows you. You're one man a long way from home, and they don't even know that. You're invisible. They don't see you, they don't see the green door, they don't know what is behind it, up those stairs. They walk past it every day and it's invisible.

I turned and went back. But I walked past again. Once you go up those stairs, they will know you. Who you are, where you are from, what you want, why you are here. I will have declared myself. But everyone there has, I told myself. You are all there for the same reason, and so you are invisible.

Did everyone in London have to go down this one street this evening? I couldn't make myself believe they didn't know, that they weren't looking, that they wouldn't nudge and wink and whisper when they thought they were safe behind my back, pushing on through the cold drizzle.

I couldn't let it go, not for what people I didn't know might say. I stopped, turned. I saw the Chinese butcher lift up a rack of roasted ducks to hang in the lighted window. My breath went out and it was a long time before I thought to draw it back in. My heart kicked. Something melted in the bottom of my belly.

Red, swinging meat, that was what the Chinese butcher was lifting up.

It was like tunnel vision. All I could see was that green door, then my hand, stretched out to push, then the stairs. The pattern of the carpet was like my Grandma Joan's. Strange, the things you think. At the top of the carpeted stairs, another door; a swing door, painted dark red, the red of the Chinese butcher's swinging ducks. There was a wired glass window in the middle of the door, no more than a peephole. I hoped no one was behind it. I had come up the stairs so fast that I couldn't do anything but push that door open. Momentum carried me into the club.

It wasn't as I had expected. Funny: until then, I hadn't realized I had been expecting how it should be. It was smaller. The space was differently used. It looked like several rooms that had been knocked together. The bar was right behind the door; the dance floor was a postage-stamp in its own alcove beyond the bar. There were two steps up to it. The tables and chairs were crammed together in the rest of the available space. They were a mix of old church hall and office furniture liquidation. They looked

# FROOKS



IAN McDONALD



cheap under the house lights. Everything looked cheap, even the murals of stars and galaxies and planets with rings around them and the big starships flying through space. I could see the beer stains and the cigarette burns and the messages scribbled in black biro on the silver spaceships. A glitterball broke a pinspot into a hundred stars, swimming across the decorated walls, the floor, the bar, the Airfix model starships suspended from the black painted ceiling. Up on the dance floor two effects projectors swirled multi-coloured galaxies over and through each other. The big sound system was shut down; the CD deck behind the bar was playing old 1990s ambient dance in an effort at atmosphere. Cheap.

The place smelled of stale smoke, men, beer and something I have never smelled in any other cheap club. I could not recognize it, though it seemed exasperatingly familiar. Whatever it was, it made my heart beat faster and my penis swell in my pants.

Of course. It must be the smell of *them*.

There were four men in the club, sitting at one table with pints and a newspaper. They and the barman were staring at me.

"Are you open?" I asked.

"We're open," the barman said. He had a South Wales accent. I felt much more at ease. "Are you sure you've got the right place?"

I took the magazine out of my coat pocket and put it on the bar. *Strange Attractors*. Smooth curves of terra-cotta flesh on the cover. Nothing graphic, just skin, but the man in the shop where I had bought it had looked at me as I set the magazine down on his counter. I could not meet his eyes after that look. I had made a comment about the snooker on the portable television behind the cash desk, about how boring it had got with all this safety play, and he had grunted a reply, but I could feel his hostility. Surrounded by every human appetite and perversion, piled high, racked up to the ceiling, in full colour, but he could not accept *this*.

The four men at the table had looked at me, but not like that. The barman was looking at me, but not like that.

"You've got the right place," the barman said, pushing the magazine back to me. "You're a bit early. We don't really start filling until after eight, and they won't turn up until gone nine."

"I'll wait," I said. I took a stool at the front of the bar and peered at the chiller for bottled beers I knew. A dozen brands of water, sparkling and still. They can't take alcohol. It's poisonous to them. I saw the packs of aspirin along the optic.

"Do you have Red Stripe?"

The barman laughed.

"We have Red Stripe." As he opened the bottle, he added, "You're a little off home base, aren't you? What is it? North Wales?"

"Rhyl."

"Rhyl." He poured the beer. "I had a weekend in Rhyl when I was eight. Pissed down with rain the whole time and nothing was open."

"Sounds like Rhyl. And yourself: south, am I right? The valleys?"

"Pontypridd. Pride of the valleys, what the Tories have left of them. That'll be five-fifty, please."

"How much?"

"Specialist club, specialist prices. So, you up on business, then?"

"Store managers' conference. I'm in fashion. Couple of times a year they call us all in and show us what to do with the new stock; how to display it, market it, so we'll all look the same from Rhyl to Romsey. Thought I'd stay on, you know; see the sights."

"You don't have to explain. You don't get a lot of them in Rhyl. Nor Pontypridd, for that matter. Nice, but, to see the bloody English being the ones colonized this time, isn't it?"

We talked for some time about the things we held in common: Wales, and the rugby, of course, and the very real prospect that this year we might win the Triple crown – maybe even the Five nations Championship – for the first time this century; and how alien we found England, where if a thing isn't on or just off a motorway it might as well not exist. We talked about everything except the thing that made him a barman serving me a punter a drink in this upstairs club off Lisle Street.

It was a slow conversation, for the bar was steadily filling up and the customers needed drinks. I looked at them to try to discover some common factor between us. All sorts and sods: tall, fats, good-lookings, glasses, balds, well-dressed, suits and casuals. Old. Young. Some women. That surprised me. How did those exciter and releaser chemicals allow it to work with them?

None of *them*; yet.

By half-seven the club had filled to the bottom step of the dance floor and still there were none of them. A DJ went up to the mixing desk and tested the PA equipment. The barman – his name was Hugh – turned off the ambient. The DJ dimmed the house lights and put on a background mix. The mood in the club changed as if the DJ had switched it on with the music. It was *their* music. The night started here.

All I know about them is what I see on the telly or read in magazines, but I understand that they have two kinds of music. I can't remember the names, but one is for out-of-season and one is for in-season. It was the second music that was playing on the sound system. Heat-season music: the music the males play when they dress themselves up and dance in competition against each other for the women. All drums and percussion instruments; layer upon layer of them, weaving in and out and through each other in strange, complex rhythms the feet can tap to but the mind can't catch hold of. I've heard it on the radio and the television, but those can't play it right. It has to be loud, as though you're down there in the street with them, in the heat season, so loud you can feel it, down there, where it's meant to be felt. They can drum all night and all day, their males. There is a trick they can do with their anger that gives them



inhuman strength and endurance. They've a word for that too, but I can't remember it either. Inhuman. Ha.

I had been concentrating on counting out the rhythms – I think it was eleven against three – when the smell alerted me. That same strange-but-familiar scent I'd noticed when I entered the club, but stronger. Very much stronger. I looked round. There. Beside me, leaning over the bar, trying to attract Hugh's attention. One of them. A Shian. An alien.

I didn't think this until after the moment of recognition. At that moment, I didn't think at all. I reacted. Excitement surged up inside me like something I needed to cough out or it would choke me. My balls prickled and tightened. My penis heaved in its cotton-lycra restraint.

I heard it say, "Any of those Boots-own brand, Taffy?" Its voice was a breathy contralto; not a man's. Not a woman's. Not any human voice. The accent was like none I've ever heard before, but everything sounded right in it.

"Sorry, we're right out of them, Loonturievo," Hugh the barman said. "We've got Hedex Extra."

The Shian made an expression I did not recognize but must have been disgust, because it said, "Shit."

I never thought of them swearing. Clean, like angels, that was how they were to me. Pure of heart and lips.

Hugh introduced me: "A brother from the Land of Song."

The Shian looked at me.

I heard the breath of a thing from 60 light years away.

I saw its eyes, like cat's eyes: black ovals in golden green.

I saw its skin, smooth burnt red, like finest terra-cotta. But soft, warm.

I saw the wide nose – smell is as important to them as sight is to us, I read somewhere. The nostrils were flared. Scenting me. Human male.

I saw the three fingers on the hands, and the small, low-set ears, and the stripe of soft dark red fur up the centre of the skull, tapering to a fine line down the spine.

My penis was so hard my trousers must be like a Big Top. Oh my God; it must see it. It must smell it. I couldn't speak. I had a dozen different inane conversation openers and not one of them made it out of my throat. I flapped my hands. I blushed. I grinned like a fool and spilled my Red Stripe on the bar. The alien danced back, quick as a knife. They are a fast people. A hunting people. Not as strong as us, but fast. I read that somewhere, too.

Oh My God. I read in that same place that to them a smile – a stupid, inane grin – is a threat. A baring of teeth. They smile by blinking. Slowly. I might as well have shaken my fist in its face. It took its water and its inferior aspirins and went to a table where three men had been looking and nodding for it to come over. It moved like liquid. Like the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I still didn't know if it was a male or a female – sex identifiers are chemical, not physical, with them. But when I saw one of the men put an arm around its waist and draw it close to him,

I wanted to smash his head to jam with a chair for daring to pollute such a beautiful thing.

"I blew it," I said to Hugh.

"There'll be others."

There were. Many others. Some were in human clothing – men's, women's, both; both sexes being physically alike, they could wear what felt good to them – some in their own styles and fashions. Some were dressed in extravagant, exotic costumes; those were the males, in their dancing outfits. Embroidered skirt panels; elaborate high collars that made them look impossibly tall and slender; beaded and wired head-pieces set with mirrors and jewels. These costumes had passed male to male for a hundred generations before the crossing to Earth. I watched these gorgeous creatures sit down with the humans and sip the drinks the humans bought them and blink their cats' eyes at the jokes and compliments the humans paid them. How dare these dirty, meaty, corrupt little ape-people with their greedy little hormones and thrusting little penises and hungry little vaginas leave their fingerprints on that perfect red-earth skin, rub against those tall thin bodies on the dance floor, send their stinking fingers creeping under those beautiful, ancient costumes, hunting for ways to unbutton, unzip, undress?

How could *they* let the ape-people do that to them? I found myself shaking with rage.

Hugh caught my eye. "You're in luck," he said. "Just sat down." He topped off a pint, flipped a soluble aspirin into a glass of Perrier and flicked his eyes to the end of the bar beside the cigarette machine.

All alone; sitting on a stool, surveying the crowded tables, back to the bar. It was dressed in a white silk blouse, men's black Levis and high-heeled cowboy boots. An empty glass rested between its three-fingered hands. Its gaze fell across me. I raised my eyebrows, the Shian greeting. The golden eyes held mine. Very slowly, they blinked. I carried my stool to the end of the bar and pressed in beside it.

I didn't know what to say. So I said that.

"You could start by buying me a drink," the Shian said.

Voice quivering, I ordered a Red Stripe. "And whatever my friend is having."

"Low-alcohol for me," the alien said.

"I thought alcohol was poisonous to you."

"It's poisonous to both of us. The dosages are different, that's all. Some of us get a taste for it."

Hugh brought the drinks, and charged me a sum that anywhere else, any other time, in any other company, I would have told him was utterly obscene.

"What does it do for you?" I asked.

"Find out." The alien slowly blinked its eyes again. I suppressed a smile and blinked back.

I talked. All stupid stuff, about myself and where I came from and apologized for that, as we always do, and what I did and why I was in London and how I found the club and how we didn't have anything like it at home in Wales; in fact, we didn't have any Shian, even, and all the time I wished I would shut up because all I wanted was to look at this beautiful,



sleek, incredible, attractive alien sitting in front of me blinking its eyes. And look. And look.

"Hey, mister," it said, interrupting my flow of inane conversation. "You want to dance?"

All night I had been hearing the Shian music, trying to get the feel of what it did, how it worked. On the floor with the alien – Serracord, it whispered in my ear as we clinched – I understood. It only works when you dance to it. Then it feels like the greatest thing you have ever heard. There was nothing but me and Serracord and the Shian music. The projected stars and galaxies moved over our skins like seasons. I could have danced all night. Exactly like that song in the old musical. I wanted too. I knew I could. I may have. I couldn't tell. I have never felt anything I wanted never to end as much as dancing pressed close to the warm, alien skin of Serracord the Shian. Time evaporated. Place fell apart.

I came out with a start. Serracord was pulling my ear-lobe. The club was suddenly half empty. Hugh the barman was pulling down the shutters. Had we been on the floor so long? There were only two other groups up on the floor with us; a threesome of two men in suits and a Shian, and a woman with a male resplendent in ceremonial dancing costume.

"What?" I shouted over the sound system. Serracord lifted up my hand and tapped my watch.

"It's getting late."

"So?" Thinking, oh no, oh God, it's all going to end, it's all going to turn back to ashes and junk like Cinderella.

"So, Mr Earthman," the alien said, bending down from its great height and whispering in my ear, "so, Mr Welshman, do you want to come back to my place?"

At that hour, the quiet was almost holy. Serracord paid the taxi – a gay minicab firm, they could be relied on to be discreet – and I listened to the silence it left behind. I could feel the whole city breathing, muttering like a man turning in his sleep. There was enough beer and music in my blood to make me feel alive several times over.

Serracord's flat was above a Jewish bagel bakery on Salmon Lane. The shop survived though the people it served had long moved on. In the end it would go too. The Shian, who were almost certainly the last immigrant wave to occupy the streets of Limehouse, had no taste for its services. Their huge extended Sororities – families somewhere between a clan and a club, I remember seeing in one of the many documentaries I have taped – are largely self-sufficient. They are not a buying and selling people.

Serracord was a free swimmer outside the Sorority family net.

"My wander years," the Shian explained as it put music on the micro system and hunted in the fridge for something we could drink. The cold blue light caught the alien features in a way that sent a prickle right down to the bottom of my scrotum. We were here to have sex. There was no other purpose to the invitation to the flat above the bagel shop. I felt dizzy. I felt afraid. I wanted to run, but something

stronger held me in the seat by the window overlooking Salmon Lane. Serracord brought two bottle of imported lager and sat opposite me. The street lights illuminated one half of our faces, threw the other into shadow. "It's our way. When we mature, we leave our birth families and travel the world, going places, seeing things, meeting people, falling in love and falling in lust, falling out again as the seasons come and go, until we find a new place to settle. We're a hunting people, a people of the open plains. That's why we colonize worlds: racial wander years. I'm between worlds."

I thought of its literal meaning. Those huge starships, like Christmas ornaments, hurtling between the stars at the speed of light; inside each, one hundred thousand naked red bodies hanging in free fall, sleeping away the years to Earth. I blinked from inner fantasy to outer reality and for an instant, seeing Serracord half-lit by the glow from the street, seeming to float against the star pictures and spaceship posters that decorated the flat, there was no difference between them.

I had an instant erection.

Serracord noticed it and smiled. Human smile. Tooth smile. I didn't know if it was a threat, or a gesture to my humanness.

"What's it like, to travel through space?" I asked to distract attention from the bulge in my pants.

"How should I know?" Serracord said.

I started, taken aback. Serracord smiled again. A Shian smile. An eye smile.

"They put you into the stasis coffin before you leave orbit," the alien said. "You come out of the space elevator arrivals area, you get processed through onto the starship and the last thing you see is the lid closing on your home world. The first thing you see is it opening, on another. In between, ten years disappear."

"I thought it took 60 years to make the crossing."

"Sixty objective, ten subjective. Relativistic time dilation. But even that's too long to keep settlers awake. Apart from the boredom, the ships couldn't carry the resources to maintain one hundred thousand people. Only the crews make the crossing awake."

"Sixty years asleep," I said. Serracord would have left the Shian motherworld in 1946. The Second World War had dissolved into the Cold War. Days of rationing, and no bananas, and the Atlee government. Austerity, wide boys, women painting their legs with gravy browning and drawing stocking seams; black marketeering, steam trains, cars with running boards. Folk still thought the atomic bomb was a great thing when the 88 ships of Shian 15th Interstellar Fleet turned on their Mach drives and left their home star system. Big words. Big, exciting ideas. Erotic concepts. "Twenty-five years before I was born. My parents were just being born. How old are you?"

"How old do you think I am?"

"I can't tell. I've never seen anything like you before."

The alien dipped its head in an expression that in



a human would have been coyness. I did not know what it meant in a Shian.

"I was one of the last of the Motherworld-born," Serracord said. "I had just become adult when I left with my Sorority. We mature early, you know."

"How early?"

"Eight Earth years."

Four years since the Shian came to take possession of he recession-stricken shell of Docklands. The beautiful, alien, hot-sexy-thrilling thing in front of me was 12 years old. My penis was pulsing so hard in my pants it hurt.

"What's it like, your home world?" I picked up Serracord's hand, held its three fingers in my four.

"You ask a lot of questions, man. Most frooks just want to get down to it."

"Frooks?"

The look of bemusement was nakedly human.

"I suppose you wouldn't know, Mr Welshman. Frooks. Humans who are sexually attracted to Shians."

Frooks. Singular: frook. Ugly name. A name like the look the man in the sex shop gave me when I bought the magazine. A name for a thing, for a condition, not a person. Not an early-30s manager of a clothing chain store from Rhyl where there are no aliens under the fairy-lights on the promenade or taking cover from the rain in the public shelters and amusement arcades full of last century's games. Space Invaders. It was out of date when I was a kid. A place with no wonder, no beauty; a place that would not allow its retail managers to sit in the darkness before dawn and feel for the first time that they were free to be what they had always desired. Frook. I was a frook.

The shock had worn off. I knew I could get used to the sound of the name.

The shock hadn't been in the suddenness of the understanding, as if the name was a half brick someone has thrown at you. It had been in the realization that I had always been a frook. Before the Shian came, I was a frook. I reviewed my sexual CV and saw the thin red line of *frookness* woven through it like a stripe in fabric. I had been the weird boy who hit puberty and had balls and beard and body hair while my friends were still as smooth and pure as angels. I had been the self-conscious one in the school changing-rooms, who fought against the chemicals bubbling inside me that made me want these beautiful, sexless creatures, but left me afraid of my want and not knowing what I could do with it. Even when I had grown into liking girls, there had always been a sense of something missing. I wanted more, but I didn't know what it was. Their contours were too much, too blatant. But men were just horrible. Big, clunking, coarse things. No slimness. No suggestion. No subtlety, no secret, sexless androgynous beauty like those 12-year-olds I lusted after while I hid my monstrous body from them in those school-day changing rooms.

Something more. A third sex.

And then the Shian came.

At first, I didn't know it was them that did it for me. We were all frooks then, when they were the most important thing that ever happened to the human race and we were dazzled by their brilliance and beauty. But the adulation never faded in me. I have hundreds of hours of videotaped programmes on the Shian – unwatched, for the most part. I have scrap-books of cuttings from newspapers and colour supplements and the magazines. I would search the fashion journals for Shian models, when they became the new super-model look. I had a pin-up board. I suppose that was the start of it, the pin-ups that I never let anyone else see, not even my girlfriends, who were all thin, and flat-chested, and boy-ish. I suppose the end of it – if this morning in this flat isn't, and I don't think it is, more a beginning – was when I told my last girlfriend I thought she would look good with her hair cut to half an inch of stubble and dyed red.

"You want me to look like a fucking Sheenie," she'd said.

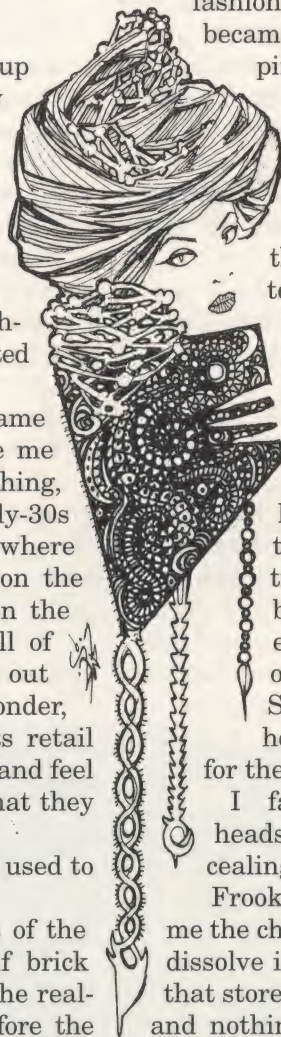
No. I wanted her to *be* a fucking Sheenie. She had done it for me, and I had been able to get it hard with her after that, which I hadn't been able to for a long time. It lasted for a while. She had looked but she hadn't been. Looking wasn't enough. We split a month ago. It was the only honest thing about the relationship. She could find someone who would want her for what she was. I could be free to look for the thing I wanted that she wasn't.

I fantasized about Etruscan terra-cotta heads, and red setter dogs, and the sex-concealing smoothness of scarlet lycra.

Frook. The ugly little name set me free. It gave me the choice to walk away from that other life and dissolve into *frookness*. I didn't have to go back to that store, to that town where it rained all the time and nothing was ever open, to that flat with the freezer full of Menu Master dinners and the television that went on at six and off when I woke up in the middle of the ads for the late-night chat-lines realizing I'd fallen asleep in front of it again. I could leave it all. I could be happy. I wanted to cry. But it would have confused Serracord. The Shian cannot cry, for joy or pain. They have no tears. All they can do is go dark around the eyes.

"Frook." I said the word aloud, naming myself. "Is there a Shian equivalent? Narha, isn't that your common language? I suppose there wouldn't be – there couldn't be. The mating chemicals make you a very heterosexual society. You can't know anything else."

"You humans always equate love with sex," Serracord said. "They're separate things with us. 'Love' is something you can show to anyone you feel affiliation with, male or female, sex partner or not. 'Sex' is hunger. Sex is wanting. Sex is needing, and burning, and madness. Sex is an intensity that non-seasonal,





semi-sexual humans can't imagine."

"So how does a Shian want to have sex with a human male?" I asked, lifting Serracord's hand into the light, examining the shape of the nails, the fingers, the bones. "How can you – which are you, Serracord, male or female? – have sex with me?"

Serracord's fingers slipped from mine. The alien stood up and looked down at me.

"You still don't get it, do you, Mr Welshman?"

In the sodium light, Serracord opened the silk blouse. I gasped inwardly at the flat chest, dark in the yellow light, and the three parallel sets of nipples. I reached to touch them. Serracord's left hand stopped mine. The right hand rubbed the middle left nipple, pulled it. Pulled hard. Skin stretched. Pulled the nipple off.

I stared, unable to understand what I was seeing. Serracord held the dark berry between thumb and forefinger in front of my eyes.

"They stick on with rubber-solution glue."

Serracord flicked the nipple, away and lifted hands to eyes. Two blinks, a blur of fingers. Blue eyes, set in white. Human eyes, looking at me.

"Do you really need any more?"

The mens'-cut Levis were unbuttoned. They were dropped, and the women's lace G-string underneath. I could not look away from the curved triangle of smooth, freckled skin between the thighs as the fingers worked free the top edge and wriggled down behind.

"Serracord, for God's sake, please!"

"Synthetic skin. They use it on burns victims. I do the skin pattern myself with body dye, same stuff as I use for the all-over flesh-tint. I can show you how to make it. It's quite easy, all the information is on the television, or in books and magazines. All you need to know about how to be one of them."

I was shivering. I wanted to throw up everything I had taken into myself this night. I wanted to look at anything but this thing dismantling itself in front of me but that terrible terra-cotta/red setter/scarlet lycra fetishism would not let me.

"I thought you knew what kind of club it was."

"All of you?" I managed to push the question through the trembling and the nausea.

"Most. There are a few genuine. Very few. Like you said, how could they want us? I thought you knew. I thought you wanted to play the whole game. I'm sorry – I didn't mean to hurt you, but I couldn't let you go on. You may find this hard to believe, but I do like you. You deserve better. You are a nice guy. I did want to go to bed with you. Still do."

I fought the surge in my stomach.

"But your nose, your ears, your fingers," I pleaded. I was clutching at hope, but the endless rain was washing it from the streets of Rhyl.

"There are cosmetic surgeons will do it. It costs. They can't do anything about the eyes, though. You can get contacts made up. Bloody expensive though. And they won't do anything down there." A hand strayed towards the puckered purse of freckled synthetic skin.

"But why? Why do this to yourself?"

"Some want to be with them. Some want something more. Some of us want to *be* them. We both want them, we both desire them, in our ways."

"But we can't have them," I said, looking the human that called itself Serracord in the eyes.

"Can we ever have what we really desire, or be what we really want?"

I thought of my room in the hotel, and the bags waiting there in the dark, and the bed unslept-in and the light that would be shining through that uncurtained window.

"What are – what were you?"

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose not."

"Would you like another beer? There's no point going, not now."

"I understand about the beer now." And a hundred other tiny betraying details I had disregarded because I wanted to.

"Some things are just too much to give up," Serracord smiled, the human smile, the tooth smile. "We can just talk; that's all we have to do. I have had a great night, really. I'm sorry to have disappointed you."

"Talk about what?"

"What we are, what we want, what we wish to be."

I shrugged. Taking it for a yes, Serracord turned to go into the kitchen to open more bottles. I stopped the alien with my hand. I lifted up its right hand, looked at the long-healed scar where the little finger had been surgically removed.

"It is very good," I said. I lifted the hand to my lips, and kissed the wound.



Photograph: Paul Brazier

Ian McDonald's most recent story here was "Big Chair" (issue 66). A fairly infrequent (but most welcome) contributor to *Interzone*, he is best known for his many novels, the most recent of which, in paperback, is *Necroville* (1994; known as *Terminal Café* in the USA). He lives in Northern Ireland.



**The Interzone 100 Gala Party** was held in the only sufficiently huge venue... a cyberspace representation of Iain M. Banks's "Culture" ship the GSV *Sorry, It Was On The Tip Of My Tongue, But I Can't Think Of A Snappy Name For This One*. (To the chagrin of Christopher Priest, his roomier *Inverted World* was passed over for its lack of bar facilities.) Millions of subscribers enjoyed unlimited digital alcohol and virtual canapés. Fancy dress was optional: J. G. Ballard came as a multi-vehicle motorway pile-up, Brian Aldiss as a helico virus, Gwyneth Jones as a chocolate typewriter and John Clute as the CD-ROM *Oxford English Dictionary*. We also noted Mary Gentle and Paul McAuley in full Renaissance fig, Brian Stableford charismatically personifying the hunger and ecstasy of vampires, Nick Lowe fetchingly costumed in highly stretched metaphors, and our beloved editor impersonating a sympathetic rejection slip. Of the world's on-line sf glitterati, only William Gibson failed to make it, owing to uncertainty about how many postage stamps one should affix to the modem...

Well, it *should* have happened like this – and after recently being a "virtual guest" at a Slovakian convention via the mysteries of Internet Relay Chat, I live in hope.

## Secret Sharers

**Brian Aldiss**, having modestly called our attention to who wrote the text in the Royal Mail's H. G. Wells philatelic presentation pack, announces a new campaign: "to persuade the R.M. to produce a Mary Shelley stamp in two years' time – preferably without using Boris Karloff as a cultural totem."

**Piotr Cholewa** gloats that he won the Polish Translators' Association award, popular fiction category, for his brain-bursting task of rendering *The Colour of Magic* into Polish.

**Katharine Kerr**, following a rotten year of personal disasters delaying her latest book, was suitably uplifted by "a card from a fan denouncing me for the 'appalling lack of a new Deverry novel' this year. He went on to imply that I'm doing this for the crassest of reasons, i.e., to pump up sales next year. 'Just like Eddings did,' he goes on to say. Surely not..." But was the card correctly written in green ink and "SINED IN BLUD"? There is an etiquette in these matters.

**Charles Platt**, man of many facets, "is best known to Washingtonians as the architect of the elegantly neoclassical Freer Gallery of Art... Architecture is just a part of Platt's legacy, however. This exhibit includes many examples

## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVE LANGFORD

of his etchings and paintings," writes the *Washington City Paper*... but at this point our US newspaper clippings agency was severely reprimanded.

**J. Michael Straczynski** of *Babylon 5* fame, asked on the net about a certain Hugo-nominated essay, hinted subtly at his feelings: "What I have to say about Christopher Priest and his piece of crap [*The Book on the Edge of Forever*], little more than attempted literary assassination, from a personal vendetta aided and abetted by Groth and Feeley, would fry your modem connection and violate just about every provision Congress just slapped onto electronic communications." Yes, but did he like it?

## Infinitely Improbable

**Channel 4's** invitation to a press launch for their "Sci-Fi Weekend" indicated profound respect for the genre of Mary Shelley and H. G. Wells: "Channel 4 hits Warp Factor Nine this August bank holiday with a celebration of the weird and wonderful world of science fiction. This outlandish weekend will unzip the anorak and explore..." At this point, passing up the chance to "Mingle with Daleks, Cylons, Klingons, & Ewoks," your reporter made an excuse and left.

**It's the Arts!** *Cherry Wilder* wraps up the ex-pat Aussie viewpoint on recent artistic doings: "The most philistine comments on Christo and his wife wrapping the Reichstag came from merry old England. The big wrap was a neat Happening; the old Imperial pile looks 200% better wrapped; a class of school-leavers in Kronberg

were inspired, and wrapped their school in blue plastic... Isn't the Albert Memorial crying out to be wrapped? A Foreign Correspondent – who recalls those dear, distant days when Christo wrapped up Little Bay in New South Wales to roars of 'A child of four could have done it!' – brings to the attention of independent wrappers (a) the tomb of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, and (b) the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens." (*In fact Britain's notoriously avant-garde authorities had the Albert Memorial wrapped years ago, evidently by a child of four.*)

**Arthur C. Clarke Award Judges** for 1995's sf novels are... *BSFA*: Steve Jeffery, David Langford. *SF Foundation*: Dr David Seed, Ian Watson. *International Science Policy Foundation*, *Whatever This Might Be*: Maggie McDonald of *New Scientist*, Maurice Goldsmith. (Administrator: Paul Kincaid, 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent, CT19 5AZ.)

**Twenty Years Ago.** "How about a new definition of science fiction? It's about things going wrong." (Brian Aldiss, 1975.)

### Publishers and Sinners.

*HarperCollins* launched an exciting new imprint called *Voyager* (presided over by Jane Johnson), which to the unaided eye seems indistinguishable from the old HC sf/fantasy list... though *Publishing News* hailed *Voyager's* discovery of a new talent called 'Pat Cardigan', adding that "Certainly one quality of the genre is that the writing is invariably of a high order." (Hysterical collapse of John Clute.) *Corgi* zeroed in on Robert Rankin's audience, i.e. drunks, by pushing *The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived* as a cross-promotion with a beer company. *The Book-seller's* Sarah Broadhurst offers snap assessments of UK paperbacks: thus, of Robert Jordan, "The fans hunger for him but he still needs lifting" – possibly not a reference to the author's alleged chair-crushing immensity or the 1,056-page slab of his upcoming paperback... Likewise Charles de Lint's "covers have done a lot to lift him, but not enough"; while of Stephen Laws the keen insight is, "I haven't read this either but he is very good."

**SF Masterclass.** "Vivia herself was a woman. Not only physically, as of course was Lilliot, but psychosomatically" (Tanith Lee, *Vivia*, 1995). "Moh heard the sound of blood draining from his head, like a faraway waterfall" (Ken MacLeod, *The Star Fraction*, 1995). "Arias plunged his blue-grey regard into hers" (Anne Gay, *To Bathe in Lightning*, 1995). Our mole reckoned this might mean that he stared into her eyes, but dared not speculate on the same book's "Almost, Bernardina deliqued with relief..."



It's a jungle out there. Order is breaking down. To stem the rising tide of chaos, a new breed of enforcer is required: a fire-power-toting man of action who will be judge, jury and executioner all in one. Alas, Jim Cameron wasn't taking calls, so what we get instead from *Judge Dredd* the "Danny Cannon Film" is a movie made by everybody and nobody, a strange palimpsestic residue of dozens of different people's conceptions of what a Judge Dredd movie ought to be like.

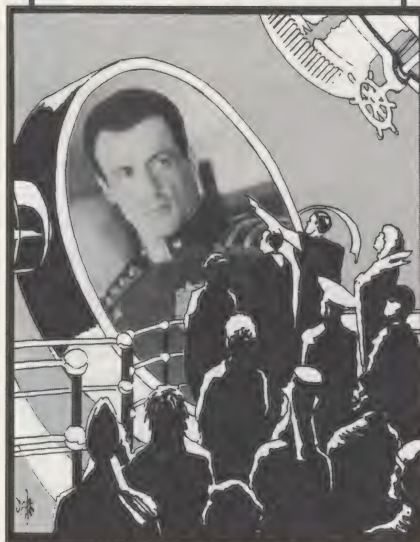
To the eye, *Judge Dredd* gives a rather unfair impression that nobody in charge of the actual creative decisions has ever had a ghost of a clue what the character's about, resulting in a witless *Tank Girl*-style remould to a wildly inapposite off-the-shelf Hollywood template. In fact, though, the well-documented production history (the fullest account is in Boxtree's *Making of*) leaves it fascinatingly clear that almost everything has been in the script at some stage, and that almost everything has been selected against in the course of the project's long evolution – resulting in a kind of regression to the Hollywood mean, and a film whose contents have in effect been defined subtractively. On the assumption that John Wagner's Dredd – and the greatest Dredd has never been anyone else's – is unfilmable, the Pressman/Vajna production makes a dispiritingly effective go of unfilming him: lightening and lessening the humour, softening the character, and taking the action off the streets of Mega-City One entirely after the first 20 minutes, in favour of a diabolically inane general-purpose Oedipal Hollywood plot about fathers, brothers and healing familial pain by blowaway action revenge.

Opposite: Stallone as Dredd "...cloned as he was from the blood of Dirty Harry Callahan..."

Below: Dredd on a Mega-City street during the block wars



## MUTANT POPCORN



NICK LOWE

(Add 15 more years in the cubes for casting Armand Assante as evil clone Rico, when here if ever was a role with FRANK STALLONE crayoned all over it.)

Now, the official version is that *Dredd* is this way because of all the things it didn't want to be: it didn't want to fetishize fascism; it didn't want to be as much like *RoboCop* as Ed Neumeier wanted *RoboCop* to be like Dredd; it didn't want to do Tim Hunter's Judge Death script (by all accounts terrific, but deemed too overbudget and "dark") till the increasingly-presumptive sequel. Long-serving Krill Tro Thargo tend to feel that these were probably the three

wrongest decisions in the project's development, and that they probably mask a more complex submerged agenda: a deeply reactionary, and unEuropean, conception of the hero, reflected also in the distressing DC versions, in which ideological uneasiness is forbidden and funky attitude requires therapeutically-correct narratives of traumatizing motivation. ("You let me judge my own brother – and never told me!") It does seem clear that, as years dragged by and names dropped out, there was an excess of nervousness in the production camp, and that the procession of unnamed US writers – evidently vetted for irony at the revolving door – who loathed the character's jackbooted incorrectness effectively killed the chances of a version that would even address either the comic's ironic flirtation with our ambivalent fascination with fascism, or its mischievous use of setting and bit-cast as hero. Again and again elements seem to have been written in to make people in the system who didn't get it feel at least more comfortable that here was something they could recognize. ("Is this funny? I don't find this funny. Can't we make this Fergee, King of the Big Smelly into a little wisecracking Jewish guy? And for grud's sake spell his drokking name right.")

Yet the unfilmability of Dredd has been disingenuously exaggerated from the start. It was always perfectly possible to make a movie of the Fleetway vision of Dredd (cloned as he was from the blood of Dirty Harry Callahan), and by all accounts even many of the post-*RoboCop* drafts continued to see this as a desirable and realizable goal. It would, however, have needed some biting of bullets. The curse of Dredd has always been that there are no great characters and no great plots; rather, there is a corpus of great short stories, an Eisneresque portrait of the naked mega-city as an encyclopaedic treasury of 800 million stories in weekly seven-page instalments, with the series lead ideally pushed back to a bit-player in a couple of tiers on page 6. The 26-part megaseries, the portentous attempts at discussing the politics of authoritarianism or (worst of all) dimensionalizing Dredd and his recurrent co-stars, all fall dependably flat. Quite simply, the Rico, Judge Cal, and Cursed Earth/Angel Gang sagas, from which the De Luca-Wisher-De Souza-Cannon script is patched together, just aren't among the best Dredd stories, whatever their historical status. All predate the strip's mature glory, and two of the three aren't Wagner products at all, dating instead from the elsewhere-wonderful Pat Mills's sporadic early tours of duty on the character, which I've always felt were utterly disastrous.

But this is a producers' movie, and





Above: Diane Lane as Judge Hershey in *Judge Dredd*

doughty wee Danny Cannon (who's made no secret of his unhappiness with elements in the De Souza draft) has been firmly controlled and contained, his script input uncredited and confined to damage limitation, and his largely-executive powers restricted to putting other people's vision on screen. He seems to have won a small number of the battles, and it's hard to find much fault with anything over which he had any actual control – or indeed with Stallone, who appears to have done his homework well, and convinces in no time on those infrequent occasions when the script allows him to play the Fleetway character. Where the film is consistently wonderful is as a visual interpretation of the strip and its characters – with Versace revelling in the designer's dream of kitting out his own private army of fascists, and Cannon's engagement of art droid Kevin Walker as visual consultant turning major trumps in the realization of costume, city and (especially) Mean Machine and Hammerstein. The background paintings are happier than the foreground sets, which can't avoid looking like no. 10000000001 in the series of

indistinguishable *Blade Runner*-cloned studio street-scenes, but on the whole the distinctively comicsy sense of baroque urban vistas is attractively translated to screen. It's not a lot, but it's something for those to whom the opening montage of back progs is an eye-misting moment of glory. For anyone else (and I haven't seen the fateful second-weekend US grosses), I can't imagine what point there'd be in any of it.

All the same, if this is a real-life Judgement on Gotham between men who lead with their chin, *Dredd* stomps all over the flightless, decapitated shambles that is *Batman Forever* – “A Tim Burton Production” but not, be it noted, the more proprietorial “Tim Burton's,” despite our hero's pop-up personal imprimatur as the curator of Arkham Asylum. Of course, trequels to sequels that were better than the prequels are generally a pretty doomed breed, falling all too easily into the centrifuge of auto-deconstructive camp, and Michael Keaton and Daniel Waters were surely right to rope themselves to Burton when he jumped ship. But the loss of star and writer as well as director distances *Forever* still further from what made its predecessors extraordinary: that delirious sense of something completely deranged masked up as a conventional summer movie, a dark and abnormal thing of the night leading its own fragile double life as a high-rolling party beast.

Even more than *Dredd*, *Batman Forever* (why “Forever”?) is a committee production, a more-or-less random patchwork of selections from the source material and the archaeological strata of earlier production history, including characters rejected from *Returns*. Joel Schumacher, a solid studio director whose only distinguishing stylistic mark to date has been an occasional drift into visually-overblown potboilers, if anything overdoes the shooting dark and cutting fast, despite some genuinely

stunning sequences (notably the Graysons' trapeze act, which is almost worth seeing the movie for). The whole thing seems to have been legged together out of a set of second-best deals, with some really frightful mis-casting of normally-able performers – Kilmer looks about as troubled as Tony Blair, the doughy Kidman just isn't made for glamour, and Tommy Lee Jones has no detectable talent for over-acting, while even dear Michael Gough is every bit as frail as he looks on the train to Basingstoke, and his otherwise gratifyingly-expanded role has evidently needed some delicate shooting-around.

But far the worst thing is what the system has done to the character. *Batman Forever* is the Dark Knight Lightens Up, meeting his match (dear God) in a therapist, and ending the movie in an appalling state of true love, personal redemption and psychic reintegration. If there's one moment in *Forever* that sums up its absolute betrayal of the character's soul as a Burton hero, it's Kilmer's ringingly hollow pronouncement at the climax that “I'm both Bruce Wayne and Batman – not because I have to be, but because I choose to be!” It's impossible to imagine Waters writing that line, Keaton delivering it, or Burton filming it; but *Forever* is full of such moments. “I've dedicated my life to helping strangers I've never met!” insists Bruce at a moment of angst. “The worst sort, Master Bruce,” we hear Alfred silently agree.









Hannah was standing at the front of a long bus queue when she saw him coming towards her. He stumbled along the pavement, buffeted from side to side by an unyielding and unstoppable torrent of people – thousands and thousands of people – every one of them in a hurry. The man probably wasn't much older than her – and she was only 24 – but his face was pale and haggard, his clothes were in tatters. She averted her eyes and concentrated instead on searching the distance for any sign of a bus. There wasn't one, of course. Only cars and trucks, gridlocked in a seemingly endless jam that stretched as far as she could see.

Then the man was right in front of her, his face only inches away from hers. He stank of sweat and sickness. Hannah wrinkled her nose and raised a hand to her mouth, trying not to inhale.

Why me, Hannah thought, of all the thousands of people in the street this morning, why did he have to pick on me?

The traffic started moving again; her bus was finally coming. The man stood where he was, trembling. Hannah thought she saw him mouthing the words: "Help me," but she couldn't be sure. The bus pulled up to the stop, and the crowd shoved her forward. She got on and paid her fare.

woman in a worker's uniform, about 30, with light brown hair cut very short, shoving her way down the aisle. Oh no, she thought, not her again.

The other woman came to a stop directly in front of Hannah, positioning herself so that they stood face to face, their bodies pressed together in the crush. The woman said nothing, but her expression implied some kind of challenge; she stared at Hannah coldly, without blinking. Exactly the way she had stared at her yesterday, and the day before that. Hannah sighed and turned her head slightly, trying to focus her attention on the scene outside the window, still just visible over the woman's right shoulder. The man on the ground had stopped struggling; he lay perfectly still, head thrown back, mouth open wide. "One less to worry about," said a man sitting next to the window.

As the bus pulled away she heard the wail of a siren.

It was dark when Hannah rode back again. She fought her way to the front of another crowded bus and leapt off, inhaling acrid smoke that made her eyes water.

A group of teenagers huddled around a fire burning inside a metal rubbish bin, their painted faces



There were no seats on the bus; she would have to stand. She always had to stand. She pushed her way down the aisle, towards the back.

Craning her neck to look out the window, she saw the man get knocked aside by the surge of people scrambling for a place on the bus. She saw him fall to the ground, saw him struggle to get up, saw him fail. He seemed to have lost all control of his body.

Hannah closed her eyes and imagined biting into something hot, something greasy and chewy and filling. She opened them again when a man shoved his elbow into her ribs, nearly knocking her off her feet. She was about to say something when she noticed a

eerie and garish in the orange glow of the flames. Hannah hurried past them, relieved that they ignored her.

Stepping over a bundle of rags with its hand outstretched – she couldn't be sure if the bundle was a man or a woman – she crossed the street to avoid a group of Hare Krishnas and came across some children who seemed to be robbing a corpse. She averted her eyes and kept walking; only four blocks to go.

Hannah climbed the five flights of concrete steps leading up to her one-room apartment, a ten-by-twelve box with a kitchenette against one wall. She stopped outside her door and felt around inside her



bag, searching for her key. The hall was dim and full of shadows; the only source of light was a single bare bulb, blinking at the far end of the corridor. She couldn't see what she was doing. "Damn," she said out loud.

She heard movement behind her: footsteps. She turned and thought she saw a pinhole of light briefly appear in the middle of the door across the hall, as if someone had lifted the cover off the peephole. Could someone be in there, watching her? She told herself not to be silly, that apartment was empty, but beads of sweat still formed on her forehead and upper lip.

She found her key and turned it in the lock. The key felt slippery; her palms had started sweating as well. The door wouldn't open. She looked up and down the corridor, then back to the apartment across the hall. Everything seemed quiet. She knocked, calling softly, "Julie. Julie, open up. It's me."

There was a rustle of movement behind the door. The sound of something being dragged across the floor. An eye staring out from the little glass peephole. Then the sound of a metal bolt, sliding, followed by another, then another.

Hannah turned her key again, and the door swung open. Julie picked up the little plastic footstool she had to stand on to reach the peephole, cradling it in her arms like a baby. She was still in her pyjamas, the little folding cot she slept on wasn't made, and there were no lights on in the apartment.

Hannah took a deep breath and struggled to compose herself; Julie must not see that she was nervous. She dumped her bag on the floor and switched on the electric lamp next to the sofa that served as *her* bed. "How come you're in the dark? I told you you can put the light on, so long as you keep the curtains closed."

"Someone knocked at the door," Julie whispered.

Hannah stiffened. "When?"

"This morning," Julie said. "After you left for work. Just after. They woke me up."

Hannah bent down on both knees, grabbing the

girl by both shoulders. "You didn't answer it, did you?"

Julie shook her head, her eyes wide and serious.

Hannah took another deep breath and told herself to stay calm. "Well, that's all right, then. You know what I've told you about answering the door: just be very quiet and wait for them to go away."

Julie's eyes filled with tears. "I did! I waited and waited, but they wouldn't go!"

"How do you know they didn't go away? Did they try to break in? Were they making noise?"

Julie shook her head "no." She pointed at the space beneath the door. "I could see feet."

There was a knock at the door; Hannah raised a finger to her lips. Julie leapt onto her cot, hiding beneath the covers. The knocking continued for at least a full minute, then the doorknob began to twist.

Hannah grabbed a knife from a drawer beneath the sink. "Who's there?" she demanded sharply, trying – and failing – to keep the edge of fear out of her voice.

"Hello!" said a man's voice, "I'm your new neighbour."

Hannah moved to the door and pushed the peephole cover to one side. She looked out and saw a short, round-bellied man with dyed black hair plastered close against his skull, and several wobbling chins. He wore an embroidered jacket over a baggy white shirt and frayed black trousers as shiny as his hair. His deep-set eyes were ringed with black kohl. His fingernails were a brilliant red. Hannah guessed he was at least 50. He smiled, baring a full set of yellow teeth, and winked, blowing a kiss at the peephole.

Hannah slid a metal chain into place before opening the door by a couple of inches. "Why were you trying to open my door?"

The man looked surprised, and a little hurt. "I'm sorry. It's just that I saw you go in, and when you didn't answer I was worried. I thought you might be ill. You might be lying on the floor, unconscious, with no one to help you. You might have been murdered for all I knew."

"What do you want?"

"I just wanted to meet you, that's all. I mean, since I'm going to be living just across the hall from you..." He stepped aside, gesturing to the open door behind him. "I thought I'd offer you my services. If you need anything, that is."

"We don't need anything."

The man raised one eyebrow. "We?"

Hannah cursed herself, thinking quickly. "My husband is asleep right now."

"Oh." The man leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Then we mustn't wake him, must we?"

"No, we mustn't," said Hannah, pushing the door closed.

The man's hand shot out, holding it open. "But we've hardly had a chance to get acquainted." He tilted his head towards the open door across the hall. "Don't you want to know how I came to be your new neighbour? Don't you want to know what happened





to the old one? The woman who lived in my room?"

Hannah's mouth went dry; she forced herself to shrug. "I didn't know her," she said. "I only saw her once or twice."

The man leaned forward, raising one hand to his mouth. "They say she was murdered." He raised one eyebrow, giving Hannah a significant look. "Now you see why I was concerned about you."

"I didn't know her," Hannah said again, a chill running down her spine. "In this building, we keep to ourselves."

"I hear it was terribly gruesome," the man said with a theatrical roll of his eyes.

"Please keep your voice down."

The man put a hand across his mouth. "Oh yes, the sleeping husband," he whispered conspiratorially. "They say she was all chopped up, into tiny little pieces, and that the flesh had been sliced clean away from her bones. That's all they found, apparently: pieces of bone and gristle. And her head; the skull was more or less intact, with a lovely cascade of long brown hair, though it seems the maggots got her eyes. I didn't know maggots liked eyes, did you?" He winked and pursed his lips. "Though I imagine they must *love* internal organs. I mean, doesn't everyone love organs? Anyway, they went in and found the body when she fell behind on the rent. Of course they killed all the flies; the first thing they did was call the exterminators. But they never bothered to sweep out the bodies, the flies' bodies I mean. They left that little job to me. You should have seen them! They covered the floor from wall to wall, like a crunchy black carpet. Can you imagine it? Every step another little crunch."

He looked up and down the hall before lowering his voice even further. "And would you *believe* I am still finding blood stains? They're everywhere, my darling, simply everywhere. Just when I think I've got them all, I find another little splash. You don't have any bleach I could borrow, do you?"

Hannah swallowed hard, trying to keep her voice steady. "You're trying to make me sick, aren't you?"

The man's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Oh no, not at all. I just thought you'd be interested."

"Well, I'm not. Except..." She hesitated a moment before continuing. "Do they know who did it? Has anyone been arrested?"

"Search *me*," the man said, flicking his tongue suggestively around his lips. "I wouldn't object." He tossed his head to one side, regarding her curiously. "You really didn't know about this? The police never asked if you saw or heard anything?"

"No, they didn't," she lied. Of course the police had questioned her; they questioned everybody in the building. But Julie had been asleep – very deeply asleep – and Hannah had been convincing; the police never asked to search her room.

"Strange they didn't bother," said the man.

Hannah snorted. "Not in this neighbourhood."

A door swung open down the hall. A grey-haired woman stuck her head outside, scowling at the man through thick wire-rimmed spectacles. The blare of a television set briefly filled the corridor with inane

chatter from a local talk show, then the woman closed her door and all was quiet again.

"Must dash," the man said, looking down the hall where the woman had stood. He turned back to Hannah. "And to think, you never told me your name. I'll bet it's as pretty as you are."

Hannah said nothing.

"Well, *my* name is John, and I'm just across the hall if you need me." He winked and bared his yellow teeth once more. "I'd be very surprised if you didn't. This seems like a dangerous building; I think I'm going to like it here."

Hannah slammed the door and slid all three metal bolts across. She pushed the peephole cover aside and watched the man re-enter his own apartment. She didn't move until she saw his door close behind him. Julie stayed hidden beneath her blanket. "It's all right, he's gone," Hannah said.

The blanket shifted and the child's head reappeared: a tiny skull, all eyes and hollow cheeks.





Blonde hair that would eventually go brown – if she lived long enough – and translucent skin lined with tiny blue veins. She was small for her age, Hannah thought, much too small.

Hannah pointed at her bag, which was still on the floor where she'd dropped it. "I couldn't get any meat," she said, "but there's other stuff if you want it."

Julie lunged from her cot and turned the bag upside down, spilling its contents across the floor: a chunk of stale bread and a tiny piece of hardened cheese. She swallowed the cheese in one gulp, then grasped the bread with both hands and sat cross-legged on the floor, grunting and tearing the bread with her teeth.



Walking to the bus stop in the morning was like climbing over an obstacle course of beggars' hands. Every step brought another outstretched palm to block Hannah's way. She knew it was her uniform that made her a target, a uniform made it obvious she had a job. But having a job didn't mean she had money; by the time she paid for her rent and her fares, there was almost nothing left. Certainly nothing for strangers. Not even for herself. Not while she had Julie to feed.

She gritted her teeth and forced her way forward, imagining she was clearing a path through a jungle, swinging a razor-sharp machete at a tangle of overgrown fronds shaped like human fingers.

She had to hurry. She'd left home later than usual that morning; Julie had screamed and sobbed and begged her not to go, until the only solution was to give her a larger than normal dose of sedative. Hannah was always very careful about the dosage, using a razor blade to slice the pill into four equal quarters. Most days – now the child had come to trust her – she only ground one segment into a powder which she sprinkled in a glass of synthetic milk. Today she ground three. Julie was dozing on the couch when

she left.

The short-haired woman was already waiting at the bus stop; she gave up her place in the queue and moved to the back, to stand behind Hannah.

Hannah was scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees, when her boss's son, Lovell, came into the kitchen.

She looked up and saw him leaning back with both elbows resting on the counter. Lovell was a blonde-haired Adonis who liked to dress up as an old-fashioned country squire, and today he looked as if he was going on a fox hunt. He had the hat, the jacket, everything. Even the boots, which Hannah noticed were covered in mud. A line of black footprints led from the door to the point where he was standing now. "So how are we today, Hannah?"

Hannah wrung out her sponge in the bucket of soapy water that sat beside her on the floor. "Wonderful," she answered drily.

"Good," he said. "That's what we like to hear." He pushed himself away from the counter and walked across to the refrigerator, leaving another set of tracks. He opened the door and the light went on inside, revealing shelf after shelf of brightly coloured food: crispy green and yellow vegetables, shiny fruits in shades of orange and red and purple, meat oozing blood like sweet dark wine.

Everything in the fridge was carefully inventoried. No one took anything out without signing for it: a necessary measure to stop servants, such as Hannah, from helping themselves.

Lovell selected a steak – a large one, at least an inch thick – and laid it across a marble cutting-board before signing his name to the inventory sheet mounted on the wall. He carefully sliced the steak into bite-sized chunks and then tossed them into a bowl, which he placed on the floor. "Here, boy," he said, opening the back door to a small black-and-white dog that scurried, yapping, towards the bowl of steak and thrust its head in, gulping and slobbering. "Good boy," said Lovell, leaving the kitchen.

Hannah reached for the bowl the second Lovell was out of the room. The little dog growled and bared its teeth at her. She lifted the bowl off the floor. The dog sank its fangs into her arm, tearing the skin beneath her sleeve. "You little bastard!" she screamed, standing up and knocking the dog across the room.

The dog came at her again, barking and growling and snapping at her ankles. She kicked it out into the yard, closing the door behind it. It threw itself against the door. She could see it through the glass, its dripping mouth curled back into a snarl. She would have liked to wring its neck.

She took what was left of the meat over to the sink and rinsed it under the tap before wrapping it in a bit of newspaper. Once it was cooked it would be all right.

She heard running footsteps. She fell to her knees and grabbed the sponge. She was busily scrubbing when Lovell stormed back into the room.

"What the hell's the matter with that dog?" he



demanded, crossing to the outside door.

"I don't know," Hannah said, "I put him outside so I could finish the floor. I guess he didn't want to go."

Lovell opened the door and the dog leapt for Hannah's throat.

Her new neighbour's door swung open the instant she reached the top of the steps; his greasy head poked out into the hall, and he smiled at her, licking his lips. "Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly."

If Hannah was quick enough, she could get inside her room before he even managed to cross the hall. She reached into her bag for her keys and placed her hand on a chunk of raw steak. The newspaper she'd wrapped it in had disintegrated, and now the meat was rolling around loose inside her bag. She took a deep breath, told herself to be calm, and kept feeling for her keys – they had to be in there somewhere.

She still hadn't found them by the time she reached her door. "Tough day?" said her neighbour. "I know a way to relax you."

She snorted and turned her back on him, still desperately searching for her keys.

"How's your husband by the way? Still sleeping?"

"He's at work; he'll be home any minute."

"If you say so."

She turned around to face him. He was leaning against one side of the doorframe, holding a bottle of unlabelled brown liquid; it was more than half empty. He raised the bottle and shook it. "Sure I can't tempt you?"

"No thanks."

"Your loss, dear. I could have helped you, you know. Whatever happens, just remember that I could have saved you." He tapped his chest. "Me. And I might have – if you'd only been a little bit nicer to me." He stepped back inside and closed his door.

Hannah breathed a sigh of relief.



"You won't believe what I've brought you," she announced a moment later. "I've got some steak!"

Julie stayed where she was on the couch. "I'm not hungry."

"What?" Hannah reached down and felt Julie's forehead. "Not hungry? You?" She bent over, tickling her around the ribs. "The bottomless pit?"

Julie giggled and squirmed. "I'm not hungry!"

Hannah was worried now. She'd left some bread on a plate for Julie's lunch; it was still there. "Look," Hannah said, "you're going to eat this steak, and you're going to love it. You have no idea what I went through to get it for you!"

"I don't want it," Julie said, pouting.

Over the next few weeks, Hannah began to notice that the girl was getting less and less dependent on her. It wasn't as easy to get her to take her sedative; she actually complained the milk made her sleepy. And strangest of all, she seemed to be putting on weight.

"Julie, what do you do all day when I'm not here?"

Julie was sitting on the floor in her pyjamas, drawing circles on a piece of paper. Those pyjamas were getting tight on her, Hannah told herself; she wasn't imagining it. "Nothing."

"But you don't mind when I go out to work now, do you?"

"No."

"You used to mind. You used to mind a lot." Hannah knelt down beside her. "Julie, is everything all right? Julie, are you listening to me?"

Julie continued drawing circles, large and small. "I'm listening."

A woman lay dead in the street outside Hannah's building, surrounded by a haze of buzzing flies. "None of them shall remain, nor of their multitude. Neither shall there be any that weep for them," said a voice close to Hannah's ear. Hannah turned and





saw the woman from the bus, walking quickly alongside her. It was the first time she had ever heard her speak.

"Huh?" Hannah said, stepping up her pace.

The other woman speeded up as well, keeping in step beside her. "Ezekiel, chapter seven, verse eleven. More or less."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you just leave me alone?"

"Everyone has to die," the woman said. "I know that. And I can accept it. But it's the how I sometimes find hard to take. And the who. I mean, it's far easier to accept the death of a stranger – a nameless, faceless stranger, no matter what the circumstances, no matter how they might have suffered – than say, the death of your only sister. Or your niece. Don't you think?"

Hannah lengthened her stride, walking even faster. To her dismay, the woman kept up with her. As she joined the massive line of people waiting for a bus, the woman was right behind her.

"I mean, there's too many people in the world. We all know that," the woman continued. "If any other animal multiplies beyond what the environment can support, nature provides a predator to cull the herd. The weak and the old must die, so the strong can live, that's nature's way, isn't it? But what if it's your sister that gets ripped apart by a predator? What if it's your sister's child?"

Hannah swung around to face her. "What is it with you? You've been following me around for weeks, not saying a word, and now you won't shut up. Just what is your problem? What the hell do you want?"

"I wanted to be sure," the woman said. "I wanted to be sure you were the one. And now I know, I promise you, you're going to pay for what you've done."

Hannah found it difficult to breathe; her clothes were damp with sweat. Pull yourself together, a voice screamed inside her head, this woman knows *nothing*. She's just some street crazy; she doesn't know what she's talking about.

But there was something about the woman's face, something about her eyes and mouth. Then she realized: the woman looked a lot like Julie. "Pay for what?" Hannah said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The woman turned and walked away.

She'd been at work less than an hour when the police came. They took her to the station for questioning, and then they put her in a cell.

They showed her a picture of Julie, only they called her by a different name. She told them she'd never seen her. They showed her a picture of the woman who used to live across the hall. Hannah shook her head and said she didn't know her. They showed her a picture of the woman's body as they'd found it: some bones and a pool of sludge, crawling with insects. They asked her what she'd done with the woman's child. She told them she'd done nothing.

When they were taking her from one interrogation room to another, she saw a woman seated behind a window at the end of the hall. The woman from the

bus. The woman who looked like Julie. It seemed she was the dead woman's sister.

She was with a man, short and fat, with painted nails and dyed black hair.

They shone lights in Hannah's eyes; she didn't speak. They slammed her against a wall; she stayed quiet. They punched her and they kicked her and they threw her to the ground. And then they had to let her go – with black eyes and broken teeth and ribs that hurt so bad she was sure they were broken – for lack of evidence.

Julie wasn't there when she got home. Julie's things were gone, too. Her pyjamas, her cot, her drawing pad.

She did a frantic search that only lasted a minute or two – she couldn't search for long in a ten-by-twelve room. She crossed the hall and pounded on the door. "Julie!" No answer. She kicked it, over and over. It wouldn't budge.

She went back to her own room and took out the axe she'd always kept hidden on a shelf where Julie couldn't reach it. She went back across the hall and started to chop through the wooden door. Each swing of the axe seemed to wrench her broken ribs apart, sending shock waves through her body, so intense she had to scream.

Doors opened on chains up and down the hall. Dozens of eyes peered out, some in fear, others in interest. "What do you think you're doing?" a woman called out.

Hannah ignored her and kept chopping at the door until she'd made an opening big enough to step through. The room was empty. Hannah threw her head back and howled.

She had often heard strange noises coming from the apartment across the hall. Then one night, almost a year ago, she'd heard a woman's voice chanting, interspersed with sobs. She'd gone out into the hall to investigate; it was definitely coming from the room across the hall. She knocked on the door, and everything went silent. There was a tiny flash of light as the peephole cover was drawn aside, and then a bloodshot, crazy eye. "What do you want?"

"Are you all right? I thought I heard someone crying."

"What business is it of yours?"

Hannah shrugged and started to turn away. "Look, I was just trying to help."

"Wait! Perhaps you'd better come in."

The door opened slowly, gradually revealing the tableau of a small, unconscious body strapped to a table surrounded by candles. "What?" Hannah said out loud, stepping forward instinctively, to free the child. And then the woman leapt from behind the door, swinging an axe at Hannah's head.

Hannah ducked and grabbed the woman's wrist, bending it back until it snapped. The woman dropped the axe, screaming in agony. Hannah swooped down to pick it up; the woman tried to kick her, but she lost her balance and fell over backwards, hitting her head against the wall.

Hannah went over to the table and saw an angelic



little girl, as thin and fragile as a twig. She felt for a pulse; the girl was alive, but heavily drugged.

Hannah looked at the woman struggling weakly to her feet. "Just what the hell is going on here?"

The woman started shaking. She was almost as thin as the child. "I lost my job. I can't pay the rent and we are starving, both of us. In another week, we'll be out in the street. Look at me! I'm sick and I'm weak; how long do you think I'm going to last out there? Huh? How long?"

Hannah shrugged.

"Now look at her! She's my daughter! How long do you think she'll last out there without me? Do you know what they do to children like her? Children with no one to protect them? Do you?"

"I've heard stories," Hannah said.

"Then you know," the woman said. "You know what'll happen to her, once certain people get a hold of her. And they will!"

"I still don't know what you were trying to do here."

"Look," the woman said, walking towards her, trying to smile but keeping her eyes on the axe. "If it's going to happen to her anyway, then isn't it better it's done by her own mother – whose flesh she was in the beginning – than by a total stranger?"

Hannah shook her head in disbelief. "You don't mean...?"

The woman leapt forward, growling like a dog, and that's when Hannah used the axe.

Hannah had had a daughter who'd died as an infant; her name was Julie. So the little girl from across the hall became her Julie; she was even the right age.

Of course the girl was frightened and prone to hysterics at first – screaming she wanted her mummy, screaming so loud that Hannah had to gag her, screaming so often that Hannah was almost tempted to let the child know exactly what her beloved mummy had had in store for her – but she soon discovered pills kept the screaming under control.

And the poor girl was so thin – it seemed only right that the mother should be used to feed the child. Of course the meat didn't last very long, but the little girl seemed happy enough, especially those last few weeks.

Then Hannah's little girl – she was Hannah's little girl; Hannah had claimed her for her own – was gone, and everyone said she had murdered her. They told her she'd killed the girl a long time ago, at the same time she'd killed her mother.

No, she told them, she hadn't killed her, she had saved her. She'd taken her in, she'd fed her and lived with her for months. "I was saving her," she told them, over and over.

They told her it was all self-delusion to cover guilt; they gave her pills and injections and electric shocks to make her remember what she had done. And finally she began to believe them. Finally she told them yes, I remember, and they released her onto the street, with no place to sleep and one month's supply of medication.

One night, as she lay shivering in a doorway, wrapped in a tattered blanket, she heard a familiar voice. "Oh, my dear! It's been much too long, hasn't it?"

She looked up and saw him looking down, kohl-rimmed eyes sparkling with something that might have been triumph. He was older than she remembered, and thinner. He knelt down beside her and gently took hold of one hand. "My poor darling, what has become of you? You were such a pretty thing, weren't you? But then so was I, once."

Hannah blinked several times, trying to bring him into focus, to be sure he was really there. "I didn't do it, did I? It wasn't me, after all. I knew it wasn't me; I knew it all along."

He chuckled. "I used to slip her all sorts of goodies through the letter slot. She was fat as a pig by the time I was through with her."

"But I saw you with that woman – her aunt."

"It seems Auntie just assumed the child had been dead for quite some time, and who am I to disillusion a woman in mourning? Women in mourning are so vulnerable, you know. I find them quite irresistible." He sighed and pulled his hand away. "Pardon me, dear. But I really must dash." He stood up, walked a few steps, then turned around and came back. "Why do you think they let you go the first time? It was because of me. They had nothing to connect you to her – not a shred of evidence – because I went into your room and cleared it all away. Some people might have thanked me for that, and some people might have ended up a bit differently. But not you, dear, not you. You should have been nicer to me, you know. Though I'll tell you one thing for nothing," he winked and smacked his lips, "she was delicious."

"I'll kill you!" Hannah screeched, writhing beneath her threadbare blanket. "I swear, I'll tear you apart with my bare hands!"

"Of course you will, my dear."

She tried to pull herself up to a standing position, but didn't have the strength. She collapsed back onto the ground, and lay there, helpless, choking back tears of rage.

The man reached down to pinch her on the cheek. "You're just mad because I got to her first." Then he turned, and disappeared into the crowd.



**Molly Brown's** most recent story here was "Women on the Brink of a Cataclysm" (issue 79). She has been busy writing novels of late, the first of which to appear was *Virus* (1994). American-born, she lives in Surrey.





**O**nara slipped from the shuttered darkness of the dormitory when she judged that her fellow apprentice Scholars were asleep. She emerged into bright daylight. The sun – as always – was directly overhead, a kernel of yellow light in the sky's blue bowl.

She was aware of her heartbeat, its frantic drumming accompanying the small voice in her head that told her what she was doing was forbidden. She crept down the west wing of the Scholars' manse, along the path that passed her teachers' common room. She ducked and hurried beneath the flung-open shutters. A few teachers had still not retired, and she heard the deep voice of Sch. Malken, her own tutor.

She paused on the border of the garden, hidden now by a stand of sweetcorn. Before her, the land to the south rose in a broad sweep of greensward. As she left the cover of the corn and ran up the hillside towards the forest, she knew that all it would take was for one Scholar to glance through the shutters

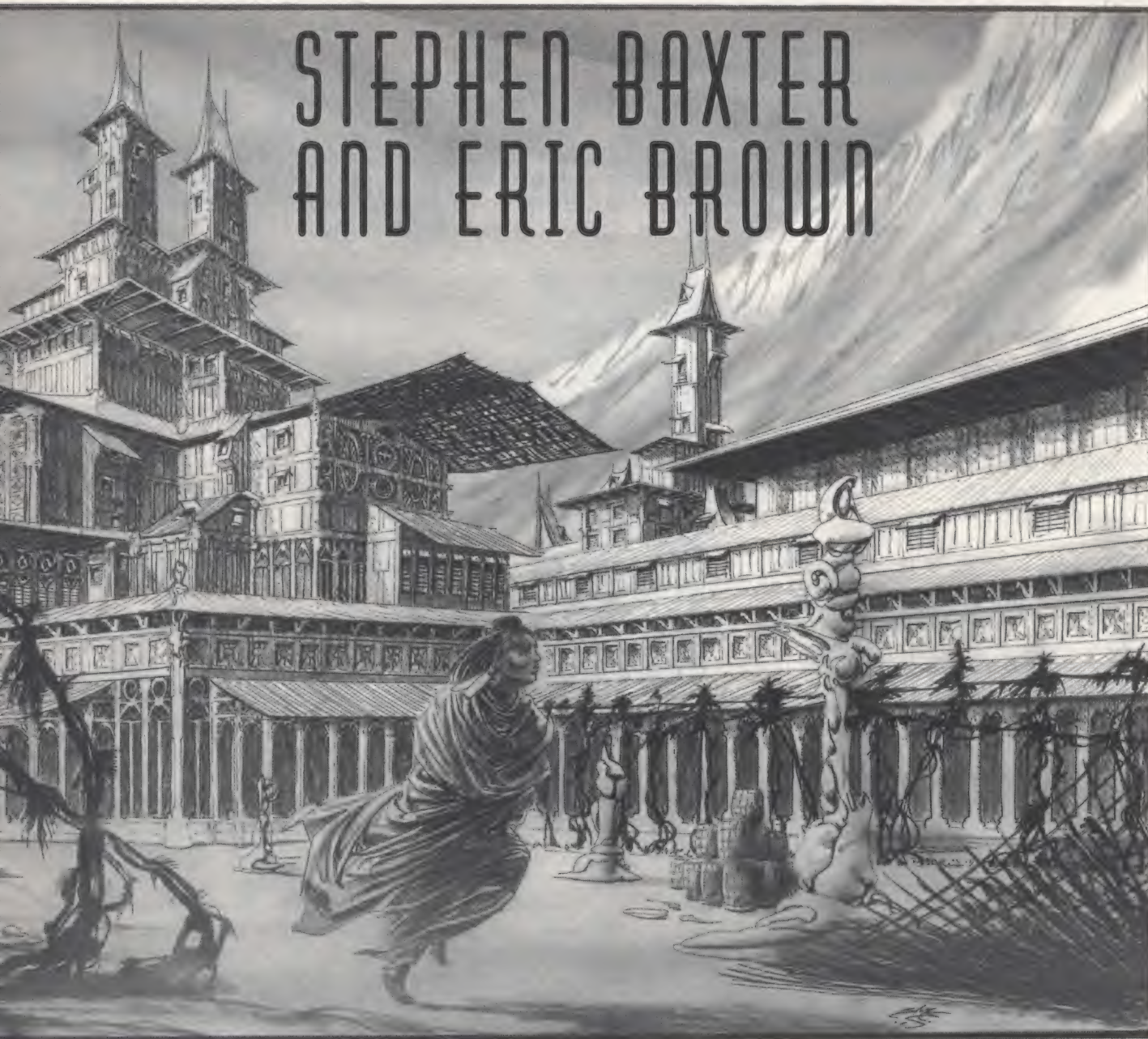
and she would be seen. The consequences of being caught spurred her on: solitary confinement for a week, or, worse, the whip. She dashed into the custody of the forest and collapsed behind the bole of a tree, breathing hard.

She gazed back down the hillside, following the curve of the land to the north. From her place of shade, she could see the Vale with the sprawling timber edifice of the manse cupped in its palm, and the patchwork design of the crop fields surrounding it. The sunlight beat down, flattening the panorama; the only shadows were tiny pools of darkness beneath the larger trees.

As she followed the lie of the land further to the north, she saw how the fields and copses at the far side of the Vale merged into a fine band of blue and green, and were finally lost in the mist at infinity. And beyond the horizon, the land leapt upwards to become a great wall plastered with sun-glistening lakes and rivers, a wall which reached into the sky, narrowing as it rose.



# STEPHEN BAXTER AND ERIC BROWN



She lifted her head back and squinted to shut out the sunlight. She could just make out a fine, perfect line crossing the sky and piercing the disc of the unmoving sun. The World was a hoop, suspended around the sun, and that line across the heavens, bluer than the blue of the sky, was a strip of landscape beyond the sun – a land perhaps peopled by humans as was her own Vale, or perhaps inhabited by monsters, like the Foe which had haunted her childhood nightmares.

But now a shadow fell on her face, and she felt the air grow chill. Clouds crossed the sun, and a flock of birds – high and tiny – fled with them to the south. Such migrations were a new feature in her World; nobody knew what they meant – or rather, nobody would tell her.

Again she studied the arch of the landscape which rose beyond the northern horizon. She scanned down the column of land, until she found the point where it almost thinned to invisibility. The Narrowing, as she had heard the Scholars call it, had appeared two

months ago, causing much comment and speculation among the apprentice Scholars.

It looked as if the World-band had been stretched almost to breaking point. She shivered. The Narrowing was deeply disturbing to her, a fault in the structure of the World.

Rested, she stood and ran easily through the shadowed forest, no urgency in her progress now, just anticipation.

She came to the glade, a moss-lined bowl shaded by the foliage high above. Rarely was she here before Kallis – he had the freedom of the forest, whereas she had to wait until the time was right to leave her dorm. Alone, now, she felt vulnerable. What if she fell prey to the wild hornbeasts that stalked the forest? Or even – she shivered – one of *the Foe*?

She chastised herself for being so childish. Hadn't Kallis told her that even wild hornbeasts were wary of man? And as for the Foe – what were they but the creatures of legend? She fingered the leather choker



about her neck, a present from the hunter on their very first tryst.

She jumped at a touch to the back of her neck. "Kallis! You fool!" She hugged him as he laughed at her fright.

He pulled away and regarded her, his eyes bright blue in his sun-weathered face. There was something remote about his expression, she saw through her pleasure. "Come," he said. "Last time I saw you we talked about strange happenings. The clouds, the northerly winds... Now I want to show you something even stranger."

Without a further word he took her hand and pulled her through the forest, heading east.

They ran swiftly through the undergrowth, Kallis's crossbow creaking against his leathers, his footsteps hunter-fleet. She felt her hand enclosed in his strong yet gentle grip, like a small bird.

They must have run for miles. Soon Onara judged that they were approaching the eastern extremity of the forest. Despite Kallis's reassuring smile, she detected unease in his manner. She wondered if he wished to talk about his declaration, three sleeps ago, that he and a group of fellow Hunters were planning to leave the area. She hoped he'd abandoned the idea; she couldn't imagine how she might live without her lover, even for a short time.

The forest thinned; great, old trees gave way to shrubs and bushes. Kallis draped an arm around her shoulder and walked her to the edge of the forest. They climbed a high escarpment and looked down across a valley that widened to a broad plain.

She glanced northwards, into the sky. The clouds had cleared, and the Narrowing seemed more sharply defined than before. *Was it closer?* Was the Narrowing passing along the length of the World-wheel, towards her?

Kallis pointed to a place on a hillside, far to the east. "Look. See there!"

She saw what she thought at first was the dark shadow of a cloud, rushing over the sunlit landscape. Then the shadow changed shape – too rapidly for a cloud – and transformed itself from a long ellipse into an oblate blob. Now it changed direction, flowing down a valley like a viscous fluid.

"What is it?"

"Hornbeast, Onara. A massive herd of hornbeast." Now she saw real concern etched into his sun-beaten features. "It is as I have told you. They're leaving their stamping grounds. And not only hornbeast. Other animals too. Everything we hunt. Everything we depend upon to survive. They're all leaving." Kallis looked down at her, his expression troubled. "Winter," he said, experimenting with the unfamiliar word. "You told me that Winter was approaching – that Winter is at the heart of this. Have you found out what a Winter is?"

She avoided his gaze. "I'm sorry. I've tried. Scholar

Malken won't answer. He knows something – I *know* he knows – but he's keeping the knowledge to himself."

Over the years, she was coming to realize, the Scholars had taught her little but the basics of reading and writing. Oh, she had studied the geometry of the World, and had read the epic poems of times past, the plays about the daily life of the ancients – but even in this literature there was a singular lack of genuine enquiry. The origin of humankind's past, she felt, was a closed book – and she was coming to understand that the future was similarly closed. Even about something as fundamental, and dangerous, as this mysterious Winter, she'd been able to piece together no more than fragments of lore.

"Winter is... I think it's a period of shadow, of cold. Of darkness." She paused. "I understood too that it is dangerous, this Winter."

Kallis snorted. "Dangerous? How can shadow be dangerous? And darkness. I know darkness only when I close my eyes or secure the shutters on my hut. And what is cold? I know what heat is. But how can I imagine cold?" He shook his head. "Life without heat?"

"Kallis, other things have been happening in the manse. Strange things. Three of my friends have disappeared over the past six sleeps. One lesson they were there, and then they were gone. No explanation. Almora... my closest friend. Just gone."

He glanced at her. "It might have something to do with..." he gestured at the clouds, the fleeing hornbeasts – "with this?"

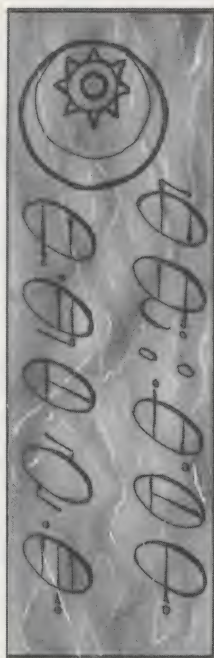
"I don't know – but maybe. All these strange things at once – maybe they're connected. Also, Scholars have disappeared. They seem ill, slow and feeble, and then they go." She tried to remember if Almora had seemed sickly. She had noticed nothing very amiss; perhaps her friend had been quiet, withdrawn. Or perhaps she was being wise after the event.

Kallis said, "The Scholars do know something. I'm convinced of that. We were riding north of here through Jade Valley, two sleeps ago. We saw a plantation, heavily guarded by Scholars. The plants were like nothing I've ever seen before – tall, blood-red flowers. We were told to move on. The guards were armed with crossbows."

They stood and stared down into the valley.

She wanted to ask him if he had yet made his decision to leave with the Hunters, but the words stuck in her throat. Kallis moved a hand to the small of her back, rubbing the base of her spine in the way he knew she liked. She tried to forget what might lie ahead, and reached up for his lips.

He found a grassy bank where they made love, Kallis as careful and gentle as ever, as if she were a fragile object that might break with rough handling. Even at the height of his passion he was restrained – his gentleness seemingly emphasized by his bulk. For a while her worries were banished, only for them





to return tenfold as they lay side by side and stared up at the sunlight streaming down through the tree-tops.

From a branch above her head dangled a cluster of sunfly pods. The pods were only partly formed – small, open balls of webbing, suffused with sunlight – and inside them larvae could be seen, patiently building. Idly she watched the tiny motion, lost in the detail of it. One larva was proceeding more slowly than the rest; its pod was barely half completed. She pointed this out to Kallis.

He smiled. "That one doesn't want to be a sunfly," he said. "Perhaps he likes being a larva."

"Or perhaps it's the change he's scared of. Nobody likes change, I suppose."

The silence stretched, and she knew what he was thinking.

"Kallis..."

"Mmmm?"

"What you said before, about leaving...?"

He sighed. "The Hunters must go. Our prey have fled south, and so we're going after them, into the mountains." He mussed her hair. "We are Hunters. We can't live on sweetcorn alone, Onara."

"But how can you outrun Winter?"

He frowned. "I don't know. But what else can we do? Where else could we run? The Edges?"

"The Edges?" she repeated, startled. The Edges were invisible mountains – it was said – at the east and west borders of the World, badlands inhabited by strange beasts, madmen and the Foe. She had heard many horror stories of the Edges, most no doubt apocryphal, designed to scare children, warn off adventurous adolescents from ever straying. But if only a tenth of the tales were true...

"They say no one ever returns from the Edges."

Drily, he said, "You're supposed to be a Scholar's apprentice. Do you know anyone who's actually been there, Onara?" When she failed to reply, he went on, "There are other tales. The Hunters have legends, stories, about warriors who trek for days through the badlands, who discover wondrous lands beyond, and bountiful hunting grounds. Who knows what the truth is?"

He took her hand. "Come with me, Onara. Leave behind your studies. You said yourself you have grown to hate the manse."

"You won't be coming back?"

"Who knows what we'll be doing? If this Winter is as dangerous as you make out... Onara, I want you with me."

"I don't know! I need time to think. So many strange things are happening. For so long my life has been ordered, regulated. And now everything is changed."

"I'll be leaving at the first hour two sleeps from now," Kallis said in a voice heavy with ultimatum. "I'll meet you in the glade."

It was the hour before the breakfast call. Onara lay on her pallet in the shuttered darkness, unable to sleep. She would be tired during lessons, and this would be remarked upon by the Scholars, but she no





longer feared reprimand. Events had carried her past the point where she regarded the rules and petty laws of the manse as sacrosanct. Great changes were imminent, whether she left with Kallis or not. She touched the choker at her neck and considered the future.

*The next time I rise, she thought, I must decide whether to leave with Kallis.*

She settled early to her work. She sat alone in a long cloister, working through a volume of gaudy legends. She was soon bored; she'd studied this material several times before, and was now supposed to commit it to memory. *Like so many lessons of late, she thought. I'm learning nothing.*

A breath of hot wind blew through the cloister and riffled the leaves of the tome on her desk –

"Onara!"

She jumped.

Sch. Malken was beside the desk, smiling down at her. "My brightest pupil, Onara – a talent wasted in this age." He seemed to be talking to himself; he appeared impatient, disturbed. Sch. Malken was tall, with a full head of dark hair brushed back from a high forehead. He wore the traditional white robes of the Scholar. Many girls envied Onara her tutor, and could not understand her indifference to him.

Now his eyes were on her, deep, searching – they held a hunger she had come to recognize, though it disturbed her.

"Enough of these books. Come with me, Onara. I've something new to show you. *The truth.*"

It was as if he'd been reading her thoughts. She stared at him, astonished.

Sch. Malken escorted her to the stables, where he selected a hornbeast. At his gesture, she climbed aboard the broad saddle behind him. They left the manse and moved slowly into the hills which bordered the Vale to the west, and then through a narrow pass and beyond, into a region Onara had never visited before.

The land here was flat and parched, devoid of water and life. She had the impression of great antiquity; the sunlight was like a solid thing, embedding her in this ancient, dead landscape. Yellow dust rose up in great clouds around the hooves of the patient hornbeast, so that Onara was forced to wrap a scarf across her mouth. Her head was filled with the stink of the weary, aged 'beast as it toiled through the pitiless light.

"Where are we going, Scholar Malken?"

He raised his hand in a gesture advising silence and patience.

They followed a path into a widening valley, and at the far end Onara made out a squat, stone-built structure. As they approached, she saw that young Scholars armed with bows guarded the building.

Sch. Malken climbed from the 'beast and helped Onara down. She paused before the building. It had appeared small from a distance, but now it loomed over her, dark and imposing, like the structures she had seen in drawings and paintings in old history books.

The Scholar took her hand and, under the gaze of the guard, escorted her into a shadowy vestibule. Torchlight illuminated a flight of narrow stone steps, descending below ground level. They walked carefully down the steps and stood before a blank stone wall.

Then, as if driven by magic, a section of the wall swung open, and a bright light emanated from the room, illuminating its contents.

Onara could only stare.

A table and two chairs, formed of a white, stone-like material as if extruded from the floor itself, occupied the centre of the room. Sch. Malken gestured Onara inside. Her sandalled feet slapped on the cool surface of the white stone.

On the table stood two goblets.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"It was built by our distant ancestors. We do not know its original purpose." Sch. Malken gestured towards the goblets. "Please, join me. Drink the wine."

He lifted a goblet, smiled at her and drank. With both hands – the goblet was large and heavy – Onara lifted the blood-red liquid to her lips and sipped. It was sweet and as thick as syrup.

As the liquid reached her belly, she felt a bubble of coldness swell out through her system. It was a hard, unpleasant feeling – as if she had been invaded. She put the goblet down and stared at the dregs of the drink.

"What is it?"

"Poppy wine. That's all." He smiled at her. "Onara, I have watched you grow wise enough to understand that there are mysteries beyond your studies. Now, you are ready to learn more. You must have many questions."

*At last, she thought. But she wondered why he had invited her here – why now, suddenly, he was prepared to be open with her. What did he want with her?*

"What is the Narrowing?" she blurted. "And Winter? One day I overheard two Scholars discussing Winter..."

"Understand that although we hold ancient wisdom, Onara, some of the mysteries of our World are beyond even our understanding. We know that every 30 generations a Winter consumes the land –"

"Then Winter is real?"

"Oh, yes, my dear. It is a period without sunlight for 30 generations, a time so cold that nothing will survive on the land. The Narrowing presages this Winter, and the Scholars make preparations –"

"The Scholars come down here," Onara interrupted. "Here, our people can survive the Winter?"

Her tutor inclined his head. "Just so. Now come, this way." He gestured towards a white wall, and as he approached a door-shaped section of it swung open.

Onara followed her tutor into the second, much larger chamber. This one was empty, but for a painting which almost covered one wall.

Onara quailed.

"Go ahead," Malken said. "Study it. It's only an



image. It can't hurt you."

Onara approached the image – and discovered that it was not a painting at all. The detail was too fine, too realistic. It was as if a scene from life had been frozen, chiselled into a block, and set into the wall. She could not detect how it had been manufactured.

The picture showed a single, immense beast. Bipedal, it had thick legs and powerful, longer-than-normal arms; and its chest and head were grossly swollen. Its face was a mask of hard blue chitin, and it leered down at Onara with black eyes. It was almost human – a travesty of the human form, but close enough for its horror to be all the greater.

She recognized the beast from a thousand legends. This was the *Foe*: as terrible as any childhood nightmare, but made real by this extraordinary depiction.

She heard Sch. Malken's voice, rational, reassuring. "Our World is a fortress," he said. "A fortress of light. And beyond the fortress roam beasts like this. *The Foe*."

"But what is this monster? Where does it come from? How –"

He placed a finger on her lips, silencing her. "In the remote past, we fought such demons. We won – or survived, at any rate – but at a terrible cost.

"Once, Onara, we inhabited the full length of the World. Now we exist in scattered groups of Scholars, Farmers and Hunters. For generations the World sustains us, in reasonable comfort – but then, to survive the Winters, we must resort to – ah – extreme measures."

He moved towards the far wall, and passed through another miraculous doorway. Onara followed. They stood on the threshold of the largest chamber yet, a long, low room receding in perspective. White cots the shape of sunfly-larva pods lined the walls on either side.

Onara stood in the entrance, reluctant to step forward. Ahead of her, Sch. Malken turned and held out a hand. "Come, there is no need to be afraid."

She took his hand and joined him by the first pod. Her stomach turned. The body in the pod was stiffened and bloated, its skin a sickly shade of blue. Its transformation, however, did not prevent her recognition.

"Scholar Greer!" Greer had been Almora's personal tutor...

Sch. Malken drew her towards the next pod. Onara had to force herself to follow him, for she knew what she would find.

Sure enough, Almora lay in the pod, as blue and bloated as her tutor. She was curled up – almost like a child, Onara thought; and yet Almora's limbs were twisted, her blue face distorted, her mouth stretched wide as if in a frozen scream.

"Is she dead?"

Sch. Malken shook his head. "Merely... sleeping. This is encystment, not death. After Winter, when the sunlight returns, Almora and the others will wake and rebuild society."

Onara stared down the length of the chamber. She





quickly calculated that approximately a thousand pods occupied the walls.

A *thousand*? The Farmers, the Hunters – why, there must be ten times as many people in the Vale! “But what of all the others?”

He stood before her, tall, authoritative, his voice gentle. “I am afraid that many will perish as the temperatures drop and ice covers the Vale.”

She stared at him. “Some will be left to die?” she asked, incredulous.

“That is the way it has always been.”

“But that’s...” She was shaking her head at the enormity of what he had said. “That’s *barbaric*.” She tried to order her thoughts, marshal pertinent questions. She was aware of his eyes on her, ambiguous, calculating.

“Why was the World built like this, so every Winter so many would perish?”

He stared down at her. “The World was not built by humans,” he told her. “And so it was not built *for* humans. Aeons ago, humans came from other suns in great ships. We found this artefact, this World, deserted. Its builders had long since left, for reasons we do not know. We made the World our home. We battled with the Foe. Over the generations, we lost the ability to travel beyond the World – maybe during the war.” He laid a hand on Onara’s shoulder. “Long ago, to combat Winter, we developed the means to harvest and prepare the wine of the poppy. Once sealed within this tomb, we will sleep through the Winter like generations of Scholars before us. And when the sunlight returns...”

She stared at him. “We...?” Onara felt the blood drain from her face. *I have already drunk the wine*, she thought. *Already...*

“I must become like her, like Almora?”

“As Scholars, our pods are reserved. It will be a new World, Onara.” His hand was heavy on her shoulder. “You and I – together in a cleansed, new World.”

A fierce wind battered the shutters of the dormitory.

Onara could not sleep. She lay on her pallet and considered all that had happened to her, the choice she had to make. Scholar Malken had promised her salvation from the certain death that awaited if she remained in the Vale, but the images of Almora and Greer returned to her, blue and bloated, and all she could feel was horror.

Onara thought about Kallis and the others left to die – but perhaps Sch. Malken was wrong. Perhaps there was some way to survive on the surface?

Besides – she discovered with wonder, when she looked into her heart – she would rather die with her lover than live the rest of her life with Sch. Malken.

When all the apprentices were asleep, Onara slipped from the dormitory for the last time.

She reached the glade in the forest. The dell did not seem the welcoming place she had come to know; the light from above was harsh, the tree-tops stirred by the wind. Kallis was waiting for her, arms folded. His face was set, his eyes troubled; she thought she

saw love in his expression, and certainly tenderness, but also a determination that frightened her.

“Well?” His voice was hard. “Have you decided?”

“We have to flee, Kallis.”

“I know. I told you – the southern mountains. I have a hornbeast, waiting. We can be there in –”

“No!” The strength in her own voice surprised her. “You don’t understand.” She told him, rapidly, of what she had learned from Sch. Malken – of the tomb in the desert, the poppy wine.

“You can’t outrun the Narrowing, Kallis.” She took his hands and pulled him to her. “You must face this. If you follow the herds, you’ll be killed, you and all your people – long before you reach the mountains. Even there, you’d find no shelter.”

“So we’ll die. All of us, except the Scholars. And those they choose to save. No wonder they guard the poppies so well! But why must it be so?” His dropped her hands and fingered his bow, and anger made his eyes hard. “Why not grow more poppies, enough for everyone? No, of course not – they wish to choose who will live with them in the New World. They wish to keep the power to themselves.”

The taste of the wine she had already taken, in her ignorance, seemed to burn in her mouth. It was as if she could feel it, heavy in her stomach; she felt shamed, as if she had betrayed Kallis. “None of this matters now, Kallis, I don’t care about the Scholars and their poppy wine.”

Now, with visible effort, he restrained his anger. “You must care, Onara. Listen to me. Go back –”

“No!”

“You must. If this shelter and the blood of the poppy will save you, then you must return.”

She thought of Malken’s possessive gaze on her. “I’d rather die with you than go back!” She stepped away from him. “And don’t try to force me, Kallis!”

He hesitated, studying her; then he smiled. “I know you too well to try,” he said.

She became aware – quite abruptly – of a shift in the light, of shadows which raced across his face. Above them, the wind surged through the foliage.

A branch cracked and fell, not two paces away. She clung to Kallis.

“Is this the end?” he asked. “The end of the World?”

“Maybe the beginning of the end,” she whispered. “Come!”

They hurried through the forest, away from the manse. The ground itself seemed to be shuddering now; it groaned in great bass tones like some wounded hornbeast. She had a sudden sense of the fragility of things: the World was, after all, no more than a hoop of soil and air, circling its sun as her choker encircled her throat.

Her gaze was drawn to the darkening sky. Clouds raced across the face of the sun. She looked to the north, followed the neck of the land as it towered over the horizon –

She gasped. *The Narrowing had gone*. The World-wheel soared up above the air, smooth and unbroken, its remote oceans glittering in the light of the sun.



"What is it?" Kallis asked.

"The far lands, upraised in the sky. Don't you see? The Narrowing has vanished!"

He gazed at her, his mouth open.

"Or perhaps," she said as if to herself, "the Narrowing has merely passed down, out of our sight, into the mists at the horizon. It has journeyed around the sun, and now it has travelled from sky to earth, a great beast tunnelling through the ground towards us..."

"We have to get away," Kallis said. He had to shout above the roaring of the wind. "And there's only one place to go. We have to try for the Edge, Onara."

Numbly, she followed him.

At the border of the forest Kallis's hornbeast was waiting, tethered to a tree. It eyed them eagerly, evidently unperturbed by the continued earth-tremors. Bags of victuals were slung over its haunches. When Kallis gave it its head, the 'beast carried them briskly off to the east: towards the nearer Edge of the World. The hornbeast was a young, healthy animal, used to vigorous activity – quite different from the tired old animals kept by the Scholars – and it covered the ground rapidly.

When they reached the crest of the hill that bordered the Vale, Kallis reined in the 'beast. Onara surveyed the little valley where she'd grown up.

She felt a shiver of strangeness – but it was too late now to turn back: she could only imagine how Scholar Malken would punish her for deserting him. And besides, she saw, her home had already changed irrevocably. The continuing tremors and winds were battering at the fences and the fragile timber buildings. Here and there, the people of the outlying farms were struggling to repair the damage, to help the injured; but for the most part the farmers seemed content to wander through the devastation, peering up at a sky which had so rapidly betrayed them.

Kallis touched her hand. "We cannot help them now. Perhaps we can't help ourselves."

She felt anger burn inside her. "They're waiting to die. At least your people are *trying*, striving to flee."

"Only because Hunters have always travelled... Look." He pointed to the manse at the heart of the Vale. Onara made out a knot of activity there, white-robed Scholars hurrying from the buildings, heading in the direction of the stone tomb in the desert.

"The Scholars have left it late to seek their shelter," Kallis murmured.

"They disgust me," she said. She turned her back on the Vale, and Kallis spurred the 'beast once more.

The journey lasted countless hours.

The hornbeast seemed tireless. More than once its

endless motion lulled Onara into a foul, uncomfortable sleep – a doze in which demons of earth and wind howled about her – from which she would awaken to find her arms still wrapped around Kallis's broad chest, the hair of the plodding hornbeast's back coarse under her thighs.

They rode beyond the Vale: they'd gone so far, Onara calculated dully, that they might have passed through ten or twelve Vales laid end to end. The landscape was unchanging – a familiar patchwork of lakes, low hills and woods – though the terrain was wilder here than she was used to.

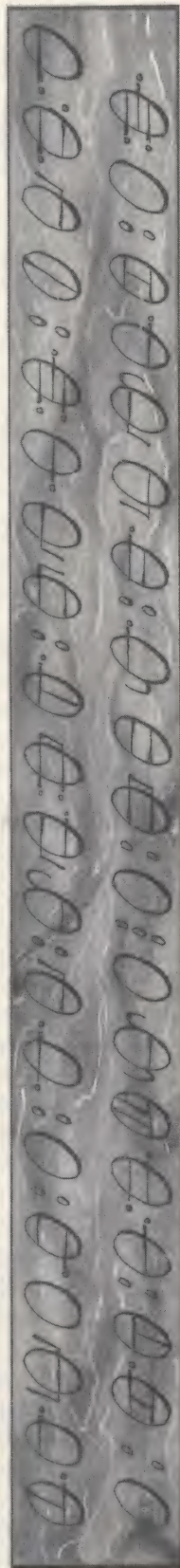
The disturbances continued. The clouds still fled across the sky, and the land rattled like a drum-skin. Once they had to take refuge in a copse while a great herd of hornbeast swept across the land before them in a tornado of dust, stinking fur and clattering hooves. Their own animal twitched and stirred under them, longing to join its fellows; but Kallis covered its complex triple nostrils with the palm of his hand and murmured to it, soothingly.

They encountered no people, though sometimes they passed through rectangular outlines etched in the land, which might once have bordered fields; and in many places they passed the tumbled ruins of what might have been great stone buildings, in the style of the Scholars' shelter. "Another legend verified," Onara told Kallis. "Once, the World far beyond the Vale really was full of people. Perhaps, once, there were humans all the way around the World-wheel – a huge band of people, surrounding the sun."

How ironic it was to learn so much, if she were to die so soon!

Gradually the endless riding wore her down, and she found her thoughts softening, guttering. The landscape changed: it became bare, free of buildings and vegetation. In some places, raw rock showed through the thin covering of soil and dust, like the exposed bones of the World. Onara's chest began to hurt. She panted, dragging at the air, as if it had grown thin and lacking in nourishment. At first she thought that this might be some illness afflicting her alone, but it soon became evident that Kallis, too, was having difficulties. Even the hornbeast growled its breaths, its huge nostrils steaming.

At last there was no past or future for her: only this endless present, the hornbeast beneath her, the broad, anonymous back of the man before her.



She woke from a troubled doze to find that the terrain around them had changed perceptibly. The 'beast's hooves clattered against hard ground. There was no grass here, nor even earth: only a dull substance that returned no light, like hardened wood.



Onara turned and surveyed the way they had come.

It felt as if they were climbing a slope; the ground tilted upwards beneath them – but she knew that there were no mountains here. Looking back, she could see for tens of miles; the land was a plane punctuated by snaking rivers, lakes, splashes of woodland green; hillocks poked through the surface, making the land look as if it had been moulded. All this still looked normal, she thought: solid, inhabitable, eternal, all pinned under the vertical light of the sun. *But the whole World had tipped up behind her*, like a damaged table: all of it, trees and hillocks and rivers, sloped away impossibly. It was as if she was near the crest of a slope a hundred miles high.

And when she looked ahead, the horizon seemed close, a definite line bathed in a deep blue light.

Kallis reined in the 'beast, then turned to her. "I don't understand." He seemed frightened. "How can the World be tilted like this? Will we fall?"

She studied him. Dust and sweat clung to his face, emphasizing the lines of worry there. "I don't think the World has tipped up," she said. Her voice was thick, her thinking cloudy. She struggled to recall what she'd learned in the manse of the geometry of the World. "The floor of the World draws us to it, holds us there. If not –" she waved her hands vaguely – "we'd float off into the air. And now that we're approaching the Edge, I suppose, most of the bulk of the World lies behind us. It's drawing us back. So it seems tipped up to us; it wants us to fall back to its centre." She stared at him, her vision blurring slightly. "Do you see? This feels like a mountain, but it isn't one..." Perhaps, she thought, this is the origin of the legends of the invisible mountains that were the walls of the World.

His returning gaze was uncomprehending, fearful, yet still tender.

She felt a thrumming in the ground beneath them. The 'beast stirred, frightened. The vibration was powerful, even violent; it battered at her bones. Above her, rags of cloud raced across the sun, turbulent and boiling. There was a sense of instability, of huge, imminent change.

"Look," Kallis said, pointing.

In the north, the details of the landscape blurred as ever into the distance, the hillocks and valleys and woods merging into a blue mistiness – but now *the land to the north was turning onto its side*, the hills, lakes and forests clinging precariously to the slope.

The land was *twisting*, she saw: all of it, with its freight of trees and seas, as if it were no more substantial than a piece of ribbon.

Horror pushed through her fatigue, the pain in her chest. At last she understood.

Kallis swore. "What demonic vision is this?"

Black spots danced at the borders of her vision; it was hard to think, and she felt an unreasonable irritation at Kallis, at his obtuseness. "It's the Narrowing approaching us. Don't you understand? The Narrowing is not – as we thought – a stretching, a neck in the World; it's a monstrous twisting."

"Then we're dead," he said, his voice thin. "How can we survive such a thing?"

"I don't know," she said. "But we must try. We've come this far. Don't give up, like the others."

Through his mask of dust and fear, he smiled at her, and she saw again the boy she had loved in the woods. He eyed the slope – the apparent slope – before them. "Up there." He pointed. There was a notch in the smooth floor. "Do you think it's a pass through these mountains?"

"There are no mountains," she wheezed, trying to find the words to explain. "And so there is no pass. It's all a matter of geometry –"

"Geometry or not, we'll try for it," he said. With a brisk slap he goaded the hornbeast into fresh motion.

The animal stumbled on the hard surface, and Onara was almost thrown off. She clung to Kallis's back, gasping.

As they climbed, the land beneath the 'beast's hooves tipped up – or seemed to – even further. The air became progressively thinner, the sky a richer blue.

The great Narrowing – or twisting – rushed towards them. The landscape swept up like some beautiful, surreal sculpture, finely detailed; she could even see the thin layer of grey-blue air which enveloped the land, lifted up with it. The substance of the World was obviously flexible enough to permit this twisting about – but she could see how much less resilient was the World's fragile cargo of life. She saw rivers and seas spill from their banks, flooding the land; forests shivered to matchwood, or burst into flame in brief, remote flashes.

Despite the peril of their situation – despite its apparent hopelessness – she felt a vague excitement infuse her as her understanding developed. *Our World*, she thought, *is a hoop – every child knows that – but it is a twisted hoop. And the twist migrates around the land, wreaking its devastation once every so many hundred thousand sleeps...*

She considered what Sch. Malken had told her about the origins of the World. *Perhaps the twist is a flaw in the World. Was this the reason the original builders fled – because of this... this accidental twisting?*

Finally the hornbeast, which had been growing steadily more agitated, would go no further despite all Kallis's gasped blandishments and caresses. Kallis and Onara dismounted and the 'beast clattered back down the slope.

Breathless, already exhausted, Onara and Kallis stumbled onwards. The surface here was hard, almost slippery. Onara kicked off her sandals, and the purchase of her bare feet made the ascent a little easier. But the climb was very steep now, the land behind them tipped up impossibly. The air was so thin it seemed to scratch at her throat as she dragged down painful breaths.

"I feel as if I might let go, and fall forever," Kallis gasped.

"Don't talk," she said. "Just climb..."

But now she could, she realized with vague interest, no longer feel her legs. She toppled forward, and



slithered a few paces down the slope before she managed to drag herself to a halt. She lay there, panting.

Kallis scrambled down to join her. He seemed to be tottering, and when he sat beside her it was with a liquid fall, as if he would never rise again.

"No," she gasped. She reached out and grabbed his shoulders, trying to keep him upright. At first his weight bore her downwards, and her arms felt like young twigs, devoid of strength.

Then she felt a bubble of coldness swell out and through her system. It was a hard, unpleasant feeling, and yet brought in its wake a sensation of new strength suffusing her arms and legs. She pushed easily at Kallis and lifted him upright.

She looked at her hands, where they pressed against Kallis's chest. Her knuckles and wrists were swollen, the joints like ripe berries. And a blue, hard sheen lay in patches over her skin. Even as she watched, the blue stain spread further.

*The poppy wine, she thought. Is that what's helping me now?*

She remembered Greer, and Almora, in the shelter. Now it was happening to her: *encystment*. She felt an instant of panic. She wasn't in the shelter. Perhaps it wasn't safe to be outside, when the encystment began...

Glancing down in wonder, she saw that her legs had become shorter – thicker – and her chest and belly strained against the fabric of her dress. She was distorting, the blue hardness spreading across her skin like a grotesque infection. She was glad that Kallis was unconscious, that he could not see her like this.

But she had never felt so... so *alive*, she realized. Her flesh tingled, as if she were growing, changing. Metamorphosing...

So the encystment could kill her, could it? She suppressed an urge to laugh. She could only die once! And if the effects of this encystment enabled her to save Kallis – or at least have a damned good try – then she'd welcome it.

The land, the whole Edge "slope," shuddered like a living thing. Kallis, unconscious, slumped against her. She glanced up. The twist was so close now that she could see how it progressed, heartbeat by heartbeat, with more landscape being drawn up into it and deformed.

She bent and lifted Kallis. Her new, bulging arms were clumsy, and Kallis moaned as his head rattled against her chest, but when she cradled him he felt as light as a doll.

She began to stride up the "slope." Her legs worked steadily, carrying the extra weight. The pass, the notch in the land, seemed closer now, easily accessible. She was becoming something inhuman, but she felt exhilarated. *Why, I'm not even out of breath any more –*

In fact, she realized, she wasn't even breathing.

She halted, astonished. She stood on the ridge, close to the top of the World, with Kallis's body limp in her arms. She listened to herself: her body was utterly silent, the complex plumbing of her lungs and windpipe and throat quiescent.





Gripped by wonder, she continued to toil up the slope towards the pass. The surface seemed to level out the higher she climbed. Kallis's face was blue, his tongue protruding. He would die soon, unless she could return him to the air.

The land shuddered. She was thrown onto her back and Kallis tumbled from her arms. She looked up.

For the first time in her life, the sun was sliding away from the zenith.

She lay on the shaking ground and watched the ball of light in the sky, fascinated. It moved smoothly, and ever more rapidly, dipping down towards the Edge mountains at the World's far rim –

*No. The sun is still. It's the land that's moving, twisting about.* And, as if in response, the earth roared in protest at this violation. The air was impossibly thin, but even so she could feel the winds plucking at her, whipping dust into her face as she tried to rise. She was riding the twisting land, she realized, as if it were some huge, stirring beast.

And now the sun touched the irregular rim of the mountains of the far Edge. For a moment the brilliant disc seemed to hover there; and then shadows, pools of the deepest black, swept across the hundreds of miles of land before her.

The sun disappeared. The light leaked from the sky.

She stood up, wondering. It was cold – she could feel it, but it didn't hurt her. A soft snow fell about her shoulders. But there were no clouds above her.

*The snow is the air, she thought. The air is freezing.*

And now, as her eyes adapted, she saw that the gathering darkness was not complete. Where the sun had been a single disc in the sky, she saw that a hundred – no, a thousand, a million – lesser lights speckled the blackening heavens, like flakes of ice. *They are suns, she realized. Suns like our own, but so very far away.*

Beside her, Kallis groaned. This cold, this lack of air, would kill him. She had to return him to the light. She bent, scooped him up, and, on her powerful new legs, carried him towards the pass in the World's Edge, a notch where beads of sunlight still played.

As the twist passed through the fabric of the World, the remote suns wheeled across the sky, and the deforming land shuddered beneath her feet.

She reached the pass (it seemed to be artificial, a conduit on the rim of the World) and descended onto the light side. She entered a magical land: a land in which air and water hissed from the ground, billowing up at the touch of new sunlight.

She slithered down the "slope" from the Edge, but paused before the hard undersurface disappeared

beneath its covering of soil and dust. The air was thick enough here, but they were still so "high," so far from the centre, that the land seemed tipped up. There would be floods, fires, more instabilities, she realized. It would be best to wait it out here.

The new landscape on this side of the World, devoid of water and life for generations, looked like a carved mask, with bare hills and empty valleys. She saw buildings, like the Scholars' tomb. So there were people here, too: more larvae who wouldn't become sunflies. Kallis would have company.

She wondered about the animals: the hornbeast, the sunflies. And the plants. Perhaps they had their own encysting mechanisms. Perhaps she would meet a Winter hornbeast, when she returned to the darkness.

Kallis stirred. Coughing, clutching at his chest, he struggled to his feet. Onara longed to run to him, to have his arms around her. But how might he react to seeing her in this new, monstrous guise?

She remained behind him as he stood and stared across the bowl of the landscape. "Onara," he gasped. "Are we still alive?"

She said gently, "I think there are people down there. See that cluster of buildings? There must be Scholars – or some equivalent – emerging from their long sleep. They must be as confused as you. I'm sure they'll welcome you. Go there, Kallis."

He turned to face her for the first time. His expression froze as he stared, horrified.

She held out her ugly hands. "Don't be afraid. I'm just – a sunfly. Don't you see?"

"Onara?"

She tried to find the words to explain to him. "I understand now. This is what encystment is for," she said. "Not so that a chosen few can hide out the Winter. But so that we can all – all of us – metamorphose into this new form, and ride the twisting World into darkness, survive to live a new life. Another phase of life."

The price of survival was to become monstrous: with a huge barrel chest, spindly legs, bloated arms... *Like the Foe, she thought suddenly. I have become the Foe!*

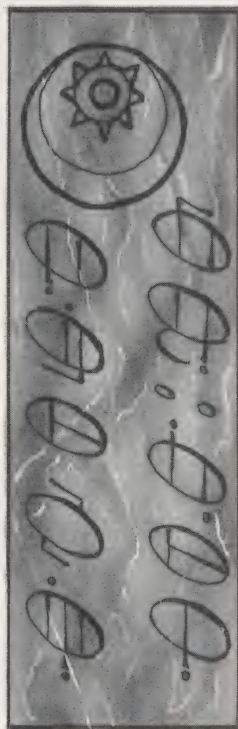
"You see how it must have been," she went on. "Once, all men became as I am. But there were some who resisted the change – like that sunfly larva we saw in the forest... And so they fought the Winter forms, their brothers. Dehumanized them."

*Made them into monsters for children – made them into the Foe.*

"And now we must live through this ghastly, perverted life, with a culling every 30 generations... But it was not meant to be like this, Kallis. We are meant to live in sunlight, and shadow..."

He stared at her, panting. Then, slowly, the fear subsided. He reached up towards her face. "Onara..."

She stumbled back from him, her new legs thick and awkward. "It's all right," she said. "I'm still





Onara. But... but I can't stay with you." The air was like a clammy blanket around her; despite her ties to Kallis, she longed to be away from this damp, soft place, to return to the hard vacuum of the dark side.

Kallis stood. "Don't go. You'll be alone –"

"I have to go back, Kallis. The Winter is my world now. There is much that I must do."

She turned and ran towards the Edge. With her new, powerful legs, she scaled the formidable "slope" as easily as she had scrambled up trees as a child.

She considered what lay ahead. Perhaps she might even return to her home – the Vale, the manse – all of it dead and destroyed now, a landscape of corpses, blanketed over by the frozen air.

She would find no life anywhere now – save in the Scholars' shelter...

She lifted her arms and, in awe, studied the muscles there. She could break into that shelter, let the vacuum enter and permit the encystment to take its full course. As it was meant to.

She thought of Almora, and Sch. Malken, and wondered how they might react to their metamorphoses.

She was the only sunfly in the world. But when she woke the Scholars, she would be alone no longer. She would bring to an end this huge cycle of repression and death.

*When the Narrowing comes again, she thought, humans will be ready. All the people will survive the next turning. Become sunflies like me. I'll see to it.*

She turned and looked down the "slope." Far below, Kallis was a small, dark figure, watching her. He saw her turn, and raised an arm in farewell. Onara lifted her misshapen arm, and waved.

Then she continued her ascent.

Winter awaited her: a new life, new goals. But she knew she would always keep her love for Kallis, like a warm, soft treasure, at the core of her being.

Within minutes she had reached the Edge of the World.



**Stephen Baxter** (left) & **Eric Brown** have both been frequent contributors to *Interzone* – the former's most recent story was "The Ant-Men of Tibet" (issue 95), the latter's was "A Prayer for the Dead" (issue 96). Both have published a number of well-received novels. Steve lives in Hertfordshire, Eric in Yorkshire. The above is their first collaboration, and they hope to do more together.

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the second volume in the trilogy



Any rain that washes America away must wash away Oz, you might think. If a disaster to the land of America rips mind and story asunder (as happened during the past few decades), if the survivors of this holocaust cannot remember what happened to them (as 1995 makes clear), if the ruined Eden owned by these survivors, lock stock and barrel, casts into their faces nothing but mirrors of amnesia (like malls), so that they are no longer dictates of Story, but merely smudges in the glass (as now): then there cannot be any road in all this land to call you where you want to be led, it would seem. Leading somewhere means maps. Maps are memories, dictates (to repeat the phrase) of Story: like protagonists. After the rain, there can be no City in view. Like any arcadia which takes the shape of the heart of the heart, Oz is like Tinkerbell: it must be remembered by the land it is the dryad of, or pass, become nothing but smudge on the mirror of the amnesiacal self.

All this is knowledge we share, knowledge which shapes the stories we tell about the changes we are living through. But Jonathan Lethem's second novel, which is set in an America after a rain of disaster has obliterated the story, ripped up the timeshares of reality, is an Oz book; though no Emerald City appears, true. The blurb for the Uncorrected Proof of the book (Harcourt Brace, \$20; forthcoming in the UK from NEL) is, moreover, unusually explicit: "*Amnesia Moon*, Jonathan Lethem's second novel" [says the blurb writer, who might be Lethem himself, or the brilliant Michael Kandel, now reinstated after Brace's downsize turned insize-outsize back to upsize], "is *The Wizard of Oz* remade as road noir."

The setting is Western America, some time after "the changes," an apocalyptic event of some sort which its survivors cannot remember, and cannot therefore begin to understand. And neither they nor the text they animate ever do come to an understanding of that which saps them, a refusal of connectivity which – far more than his noir tropisms or the poisonous flattened affect of his word-perfect prose – marks Lethem as an aftermath writer, one of those who does sf after it died, who shores fragments. Lethem's refusal to give any generic ground of explanation is, in other words, clearly part of post-modern sf's transgressive attitude towards boundary maintenance, its sense that to tell a single story is to tell the wrong story – the wrong story First SF told till space became history.

*Amnesia Moon* may be sf (that is, the Changes may have a cause arguable from the continuity of the world as conveyed through the topoi of sf:



# The Recursion Rink

John Clute

aliens may have jumbled our reality systems, maybe; or their arrival may have caused Gaia to play possum, rendering her fleas homeless for a while, maybe; or it may be fantasy (the Changes may reflect a thinning of the texture of consensual reality, caused by human sin or hubris, maybe). But any sf rationale (or fantasy dream of a Land-Before-Despoliation) which may underlie the story is irrelevant to *Amnesia Moon*. Jonathan Lethem is too young a writer to do more than skate recursions around the mired bandwagon of 20th-century genre art. The Model T is about the road to come: it says nothing about roadlessness. Reality is no longer shared by Americans. It is no longer a shared story.

Like Dorothy and her companions, the hero of *Amnesia Moon* has lost something – his name, his woman, his story – which must be somewhere else than where he is (he remains, after all, an American, though he cannot remember what it means to be one), and goes on a quest to find a wizard who may be able to direct him to his heart's desire. Everyone else in the tale has lost at least part of their memory, too; but although he is given other names in the text – he's called Chaos, and Everett, and Mr Moon – we might as well address him by what is likely to be his true name: Amnesia Moon. Unlike the companions who adhere to his quest – they include a young girl with hair all over her and a drug-crazed biker – Amnesia has not only

lost his own memory, but seems to have some disruptive effect on the pasts of others. He is one of the dreamers who create the localized worlds which are all that remain of the episteme, the Model T America we once shared, the adhesive poppycock that shaped the First SF we all (or I, at any rate) miss so much.

The tale begins in Wyoming, where Amnesia Moon has been unwittingly complicit in the creation of a local reality, one based on the assumption that a nuclear holocaust has ended civilization. Like all the other local realities or – to use a term devised by Roz Kaveney for an *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* several of us have been working on – like all the other polders encountered in the text, this post-holocaust polder, which gives off a slightly defunctive *Damnation Alley* odour, is in fact a recursion. For there is no future in the book: only shards of the past: like themeparks. Amnesia soon lights out from the post-apocalypse polder in a road-movie car, and travels across America towards San Francisco, where his memories may be in store. As he travels, he encounters several colour-coded reality polders – one of them entirely green, right down to the green fog which conceals it, a mocking reference perhaps to an Emerald City which will never be found – and it comes clear that his tour is not only reminiscent of Dorothy's quest through the similarly colour-coded geography of Oz, but also of also of the tours made by Raymond Chandler's Marlowe or Ross Macdonald's Archer to a succession of addresses in their quest to patch together a mosaic of time past in order to solve an otherwise mysterious present crime. *Amnesia Moon*, therefore, is not so much road noir as it is noir pur. It is the polders that count, and the interviews which transpire inside each polder, not the road between.

It is important to know how the story travels, and how it comes to its climax; and *Amnesia Moon* is urgently recommended. It will reward the seeker. There is satire; and a passage of great oneiric power set in what reads suspiciously like the great chamber in the Nome King's underground palace – from, I think, *Ozma of Oz* (1907) – where various characters are transformed into various ornaments, and become as the ornaments; and a concluding slingshot which spills the cast onward. But the important and moving thing for this reader was the sense it gives that all its recursions amount to a new start. That *Amnesia Moon* is a *vade mecum* for pilgrims in a tale without Canterbury. It is our exile from the City I refer to. Our tale. Our tattered robes of passage. Our way through the pathlessness of America. Our book.



**Resurrection Man** (Ace, \$11 trade paper; hb announced but not seen) is Sean Stewart's third novel. It is perhaps marginally less likeable than *Nobody's Son* (1993), being set not in a secondary world where life can come straight if you unravel the clues, but in the contemporary world here, under the moon. It is, therefore, a more ambitious book. Round about the time of World War Two, without any reason being presented in the text, everything begins to change. Magic begins to cross-hatch into the world, golems haunt the death camps, and talents – men and women who are called angels in the text, and who have various paranormal abilities – become increasingly numerous. There is as little generic excuse for this as there is for the disintegration of gestalt reality complexes in *Amnesia Moon* and, I would guess, for something like the same reasons: *Resurrection Man* is a story written for readers of the century-end, readers for whom any First SF text, and any Genre Fantasy text, is a tale set in fantasyland, nostalgia-ridden, icy with the fixity of landscape that cannot be shifted lest it collapse into dust. So *Resurrection Man* plunges us into the *medias res* of now, where we live, in a shambles of dead stories. The solution to

living in the shambles is to breed there.

Like Rachel Pollack – whose *Unquenchable Fire* (1988) unmistakably prefigures some of his effects – Stewart transforms the tale of America into a Night Journey whose starting point is barred from us by the amnesia of story-loss. So we begin where the book begins. The protagonist of *Resurrection Man* is an “angel” whose power it is (roughly) to reawaken the voices of the dead, a power which begins to afflict his quite remarkably complicated family, and to lead him (his name is Dante) into a prolonged Night Journey of his own. He is a kind of walking Answered Prayer – after all, the last thing you want in life is to have certain prayers answered, certain voices revenant – and his self-despite drags him down into some intensely purgatorial bouts with self and augur, but the tale recuperates itself from Horror by subtle and earned stages, becoming a family romance through the matrices of which certain local redemptions become possible. Brothers whose doublings re-enact just about every Shadowing available to the literature of fantasy finally embrace their differences. The transformation of one long-dead father leads to a final page of

sustained revelation, though the ashes of America will continue (one guesses) to sift upon the willow.

It is this kind of story – Lethem's and Stewart's – that tells us we still have something to listen to, around the campfire. We do not wish to inquire too closely, all the same, into where the logs were found.

Two books remain upon the table. Each of them is much too fine to chatter about, and as one of them – Scott Bradfield's revelatory fable, *Animal Planet* (Picador USA, \$22) – isn't due for release until October, in America, perhaps a month can pass; a longer notice of each will appear in *Interzone* 101. *Animal Planet* may be the most significant technical triumph in the theory and practice of the writing of allegory since Orwell. I don't know if the other novel – Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (Touchstone, £15.99), an absolutely hypnotic tale – is his best book, because I could not slow down enough to judge. I think perhaps it is. It is certainly his most accomplished, his most readable, his most consummately plotted.

Each of these books must be bought and read. They are what we, as readers, are here for. **John Clute**

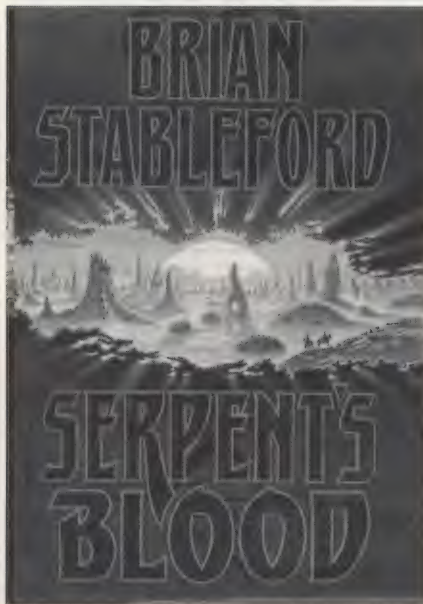
At first glance, Brian Stableford's *Serpent's Blood* (Legend, £15.99), which promises that it is the First Book of Genesys with at least two more to come, is firmly rooted in the traditions of heroic fantasy, coming on like the bastard offspring of a miscegenation between *Turandot* and grandpappy Tolkien. There's a prince and princess, a kingdom in which muscle is the principal source of power and horses of transport, a quest for a worldbinding secret across an uncharted wilderness inhabited by various non-human races. But Stableford is using the structure of the fantasy quest as scaffolding for a cunning and subversive work of science fiction. The prince and princess are both of royal blood, true, but the prince is a mapmaker, the princess an adept in biological lore. The wilderness is that of a world settled by human interstellar colonists; the nonhuman races are its indigenous inhabitants. And the quest is not for a ring (or sword, or mirror, or shield, or grail, or any other magical plot coupon) but for knowledge.

Andris Myrasol, youngest of the ruling family of a far kingdom, is exploring the ancient empire of Xandria when he is arrested on a trumped-up charge and sentenced to either a lifetime of stonemasonry or death at the hands of Princess Lucrezia, who, under the tutelage of her witchy mentor, is experimenting with various poisons and deadly plants. With the help of his cousin, Andris escapes when a reck-

## Sequelitis

Paul J. McAuley

less thief and his gang robs the Royal mint; after many reversals, he falls in with Lucrezia and her mentor in a quest to riddle the changes in the darklands beyond the boundaries of human civilization and to find the Navel of the World, otherwise known (nudge)



as Idun, where the secret of Genesys (nudge nudge) may be riddled.

This basic quest plot is informed by Stableford's rich and expert use of biological tropes. The world is one where ripeness is all, a riot of moulds and rots which quickly destroy even stone and metal, so that cities are constantly being rebuilt and written records must be copied and recopied; even human teeth rot quickly, and the colonists have been given the ability to regrow them. There are a plethora of novel and convincing creatures and plants, too, including a neat twist on the old trope of the intelligent hive race. And the quest for the secret of the world is also a search for self-knowledge; the first colonists introduced selected genes from the native races, the Serpents and the Salamanders, into the genomes of their children, and the coming change hinges on the transformations these genes may induce: "... the strongest of these," a seer promises Andris early in the narrative, "will grow to be things which are new not merely in the world but in the universe."

Stableford deploys his large cast with considerable skill, albeit at a leisurely pace. His nicely balanced sentences are never less than well-shaped, but their stately, almost Edwardian discursiveness drags at times, and the characters express themselves in the solemn tones of a convocation of professors of medieval divinity. But this (especially given the broken-backed prose of much genre fiction) is a small criticism. *Serpent's*



*Blood* is an intelligent and intriguing piece of worldbuilding, with a riddle at its heart that grows rather than reduces as it is approached. It may be a calculated move to win Stableford a wider genre audience, but it promises much, and promises to deliver.

Colin Greenland's multiple award-winning *Take Back Plenty* was a refreshingly different scientific romance that appropriated the tropes of Golden Age sf and invested them with a thoroughly modern sensibility. Its downtrodden anti-heroine, Tabitha Jute, wanting nothing more than to ply her trade as pilot of her space barge *Alice Liddell*, ended up taking a giant starship, *Plenty*, from the Capellian Overlords who conquered the Solar System, gave space drives to humans, but forbid them to trespass on interstellar space.

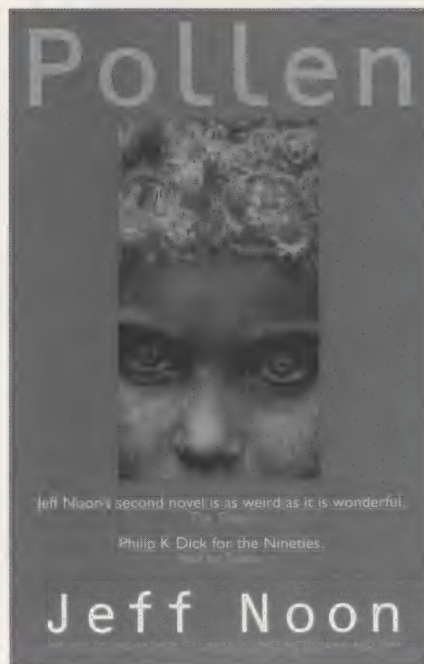
*Seasons of Plenty* (HarperCollins, £15.99) extends the story as Tabitha Jute aims her purloined starship at Alpha Centauri; a third volume in what is now the Tabitha Jute Trilogy is promised. As before, Greenland paints his vision of a cluttered and multi-ethnic future through vivid and telling detail, but this sequel is darker and less coherent than its original, a holding pattern before the promised revelations of the third.

The vast starship Tabitha Jute now commands teems with a cast of alien and human eccentrics; like Angela Carter, Greenland excels at using the techniques of the nineteenth century triple-decker novel to present credible but outlandish characters. The ship's crew are fed mostly by the Chilli Chalet, which mines its meat from a vast (and agonized) creature. Its bowels are terrorised by the motorcycle riding hordes of Havoc, the women "... dressed to kill in ripped sleeksuits and fishnets", the men in "... black leather tabards, slit to display their injuries ... shaggy jerkins, spiked gloves and crush boots."

This colourful milieu distracts from the fact that there's not much actual plot. To be sure, there's a sinister figure plotting to wrest control of the starship from Tabitha Jute, and a search for the personality plaque of her old ship *Alice Liddell*, appropriated by a mysterious figure who turns out to be a long-lost person from Tabitha Jute's past, and on the long voyage the tenuous fabric of civilization frays until the entire ship is plunged into civil war between competing groups and tribes. But these elements don't begin to pull until the last fifty or so pages of this long novel. *Take Back Plenty* offered a tour of a gorgeous retro solar system; in *Seasons of Plenty* the characters trapped inside the starship retreat inside their own heads (tellingly, the geography of *Plenty* is explicitly analogous to that

of the brain). And for much of the time, Tabitha Jute, whose whimsical and cantankerous actions kept the plot of *Take Back Plenty* on the boil, is off-stage, or sulking, or zoned out on drugs, because she has decided that she doesn't want the responsibility of being a starship captain after all.

In short, *Seasons of Plenty* displays the problem common to the middle of many trilogies. It must keep the characters moving, but it must not force too many revelations, for that would undermine the climax of the final volume. Greenland attempts to solve this transition by depicting the fall of the old order and the rise of the new as the ship traverses the vacant interstellar spaces. "There is, in every long journey, this limbo – 'neither here nor there' – where the original-prevailing reality fails." It is this limbo that occupies much of *Seasons of Plenty* as the change in psychic weather within the starship winnows the wheat from the chaff of its eccentric passengers, yet no new order replaces the old, and it wouldn't matter if it did. For in the end the clock of the plot begins to tick again, and a sudden revelation tips us towards the final volume. It was all, like, a dream.



Jeff Noon won the Arthur C. Clarke Award with his first novel, *Vurt*, which like *Take Back Plenty* now turns out to be the first of a sequence. Noon's second novel, *Pollen* (Ringpull, £14.99), shares the same setting (albeit few of the characters) as *Vurt*: a post-millennial Manchester where the common dreamspace of humanity, the Vurt, can be accessed by placing feathers, like the host, on the tongue. Now, the Vurt is attempting to push into reality.

Boadicea, driver for the hive-mind

Xcab corporation, becomes a murder suspect after she gives her rogue cabbie boyfriend, Coyote, a tip on a fare. Coyote is found dead; his passenger, daughter of John Barleycorn, a power in the Vurt, has disappeared. The Vurt's invasion, an attempt to win independence from human dreams, is manifested as a plague of flowers and their toxic pollen. Shadow-cop Sibyl Jones, who because she is unable to dream is immune to the hayfevers which threaten to kill most of Manchester's population, must find the daughter of John Barleycorn. And to do that she must find her own estranged daughter, Boadicea, who is on the run from the Xcab corporation and hippy DJ Gumbo YaYa, who holds her responsible for the plague of pollen.

Bouncing from one coincidence to the next, the book zips along at a pace that elides the occasional rough-edged and clumsy passages. Noon blends the sublime (the shape and meaning of dreams) and the ridiculous (Manchester drowning in a downpour of hayfever snot) into a weird and affecting vision that combines the visual flourishes of *Blade Runner* and most of Derek Jarman's films. And like Jarman, and writers such as Martin Millar and Irvine Welsh, Noon pillages the tropes of sf without much concern for their meaning. For *Pollen* isn't really sf: although Noon uses science fictional imagery, he isn't interested in rigorous extrapolation or explanation. Using feathers to access the Vurt is no more than an arresting image; the hybrids between humans and dogs, the living and the dead, and flesh and machinery that form part of Manchester's colourful population are caused by use of the drug Fecundity 10, which with tail-swallowing logic originates in the Vurt. Nevertheless, despite the evident haste that sometimes mars its composition, *Pollen* should be welcomed because, like *Fecundity 10*, it brings a hybrid vigour, urgent and streetwise, to British literature.

Paul Di Filippo's challengingly titled *The Steampunk Trilogy* (Four Walls Eight Windows, \$20) collects three loosely linked novellas in which real characters from the nineteenth century are mingled with fantastic elements. In "Victoria", the young queen goes missing, and with the connivance of the Prime Minister is replaced by a human-sized newt with insatiable carnal appetites discovered by the eccentric naturalist Cowperthwait and consigned by him to a brothel for "... the equilibrium of my nerves, not to mention my bodily constitution." In "Hottentots" a Harvard professor, Louis Agassiz, both a racist and a fierce foe of Darwin, receives his comeuppance when he must ally with a South African Adventurer and his Hottentot wife to defeat a Love-



craftian invasion of the New England coast. And in "Walt and Emily" (first published in *Interzone*), Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman form an unlikely but wonderfully rendered tryst as they seek to expose the legerdemain of a psychic employed by Emily's brother, and receive an unexpected vision of the souls of poets as yet unborn.

Unlike James Blaylock, whose steampunk sagas are characterized by a romantic vision of Victorian London as it should have been, a playground for eccentrics, fantastic devices and sinister occult conspiracies, Di Filippo's acidly funny tales are funhouse mirrors which warp and satirize precisely recreated conventions and prejudices of the era with deadpan wit. Intelligent, goofily surrealistic and perfectly controlled, this tryptich is highly recommended: a splendid time is guaranteed for all.

Which is not the case with Ken MacLeod's *The Star Fraction* (Legend, £10). And that's a pity, because *The Star Fraction* is that rare thing, a near future sf novel with British sensibilities and an entirely

British setting, a balkanized Britain in which the peace is ruthlessly kept by UN spy satellites and orbital lasers.

Moh Kohn, member of a collective of communist pro-technology security mercenaries, gets an accidental hit of an experimental memory drug after an attack on a laboratory on the campus he's guarding, and while logged on to the computer net wakes up an Artificial Intelligence which activates a secret plan, the Star Fraction, set up years ago by Moh's hacker father. On the run with Janis Taine, who developed the drug, Moh must riddle the secret of the Star Fraction (not difficult to guess, given its name and Moh's politics) while evading Stasis, the secret police which suppresses dangerous technologies.

There's a lot more plot than that, but like the Goony Bird, the novel needs such a long run up to get airborne that it's almost over before it begins. Most of the first two hundred pages are taken up with long discussions between Moh and Janis about what is going on and what it all means, interspersed with cluttered flashbacks and long infodumps. Although MacLeod's

balkanized Britain is richly detailed, he chooses not to show us how it works, but to have his protagonists tell each other how it works, speaking with one voice, which is that of the author speaking to the reader. Every rationalization is introduced conversationally, with all the faults – substituting bad rhetoric for logic and inspiration for deduction – to which conversation is heir. Further, MacLeod mistakes indulgent wordplay for style and dramatizes emotions as if they were symptoms of some physical malfunction ("Moh heard the sound of blood draining from his head, like a faraway waterfall"). And because he tries to tell a long tale of intertwined conspiracies from the wrong end, the whole thing stalls in a morass of posthoc justifications. By the time it comes alive, and delivers a neat shoot-out in a motorway service station, a flight to Scotland, a vision of the swift evolution and extinction of a population of AIs and a genuinely unexpected plot twist, it's too late. Thankfully, its closure seems complete, suggesting that in this case, at least, there will be no sequel.

Paul J. McAuley

I'm always pleased to meet another vampire novel, a reaction which derives less from a fascination with blood, or even a Swinburnian preoccupation with biting, than the unusual history of the genre. A single classic text looms over it with a highly specific menu of capabilities and limitations from which the modern writer can pick and mix, and to which he (or more often she) may add. No other branch of literature is so susceptible to classification in terms of degrees of freedom.

Anne Rice and Freda Warrington have touched on the domestic and the romantic lives of the undead, but Kristine Kathryn Rusch has added a dimension by allowing them not only sex but fertility. The children thus engendered, generally by male vampires on human "cows," are very likely to become hereditary vampires themselves – a prospect made no less alarming by the extravagantly dysfunctional qualities of vampire parenting. Her new novel, *Sins of the Blood* (Millennium, £8.99) charts the separate progress of two such siblings, Camila (*sic*) and Benjamin, in an America much like our own save for the general recognition of vampires in its midst.

That recognition is not accompanied by tolerance. In the Midwest adult vampires (once identified and "certified") are staked without process by somewhat inadequately funded and equipped "eradicators" of whom Camila is one. But it's only the dummies who get caught; Ben gets taken up by the vampire smart set, for whom undeath consists largely of fucking and sucking,

## Sucking and Drooling

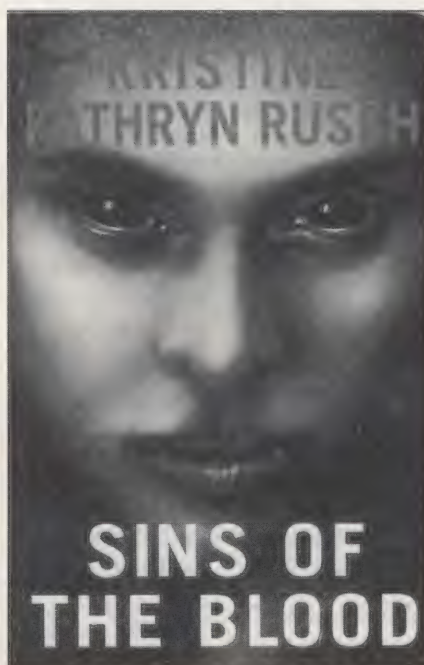
Chris Gilmore

simultaneously and to the unalloyed rapture of all participants. And the catch? My dear fellow! None at all! Ben has potential as a leading vampire of great power, and they'd rather have

him inside the tent pissing out than otherwise engaged – like his sundered sister, for instance.

I should get such offers – but if I did some long-lost spoilsport elder sister would surely barge in to poop the party for me too. Life is never as simple or pleasant as one feels a little goodwill could make it. Camila, meanwhile, has troubles of her own. She has suppressed the horrors of her childhood and the trauma which ended it, and consequently never thought of herself as a potential vampire, but the change tends to come with the peak of sexuality; she is 28 and (but for some paternal incest two decades ago) a virgin, which many might think trouble enough without the prospect of graduating from staker to staked. Now, to compound her worries, the memories re-emerge so (of course) she goes in search of baby brother.

The situation is more than a little artificial, even in terms of its own postulates, but Rusch handles Camila's emotions with sufficient conviction to get away with it most of the time. Ben's are both less believable and less interesting; Marc Boxer did a splendid caricature of George Best soliloquizing "I can lick any girl in the place..." and if you're the sort who can identify with that you can surely judge Ben's character better than I. As for the descriptions of his innumerable easy conquests ... women moaning and arching under the impact of multiple orgasm never seem to say much worth listening to, let alone read about. A crisp observation that "Darling, the





ceiling needs painting," would raise the tone no end.

Perhaps to compensate for the central lack of realism, Rusch feels the need to burden the narrative with flatly written accounts of mundane actions with which she is no less impatient than the reader: "He pulled some money out of a money clip in his pocket and tossed a number of bills on the table. Then he extended his arm." A more careful writer would have reduced this to "He tossed some bills on the table and offered her his arm." Do you really care if vampires use clips or pocket books? Thought not. As for the girl being entertained, she's so besotted she wouldn't notice if he stashed his notes between the leaves of a ninth-century Persian Koran bound in silver and ivory for a pious princess.

At another point, and to the detriment of the atmosphere, a coffee mug changes into a bone-china cup in less than 20 lines, adding to the impression of a book hastily slung together by someone who could afford neither the time nor the effort for a proper job. It's a pity, as the structure is sound, there's a good central character and a satisfactory if abrupt climax – but with such a glut of good vampire novels to choose from, I can't recommend this one.

By one of those synchronicities that seem to dog me, Nicola Griffith's *Slow River* (Del Rey, \$18; forthcoming in the UK from HarperCollins) is also based on highly contrived premises and primarily a character-study of a young single woman with a history of incestuous abuse. Sometime early next century, young millionairess Lore Van Oesterling is kidnapped and held to ransom. Her family refuses to pay up (whether from principle or some darker motive is left unclear), but after much ritual humiliation (broadcast on the net) she escapes, stark naked and with a nasty flesh-wound. And is she picked up by the police? or an honest passerby who calls them, of course, but the media first? or even a rival gang? None of these! Her cries are heard by Spanner, a female information pirate who bundles her home, has her wound tended by an incurious doctor and sets about initiating Lore into her own disreputable profession and a lesbian relationship (by no means the first such for either, which is just as well – suppose Lore had been unambiguously straight?).

All right, it could have been a lot worse. Griffith has the sense to take the sex as read rather than gloat over their orgasms most of the time, and although her technique of alternating between progression in first-person past tense and flashback in third-person historic present is mannered and overdone, the story is strong enough to take it. Best of all, Lore is

no poor, empty-headed little rich girl; she has been very well versed in the family business of water purification, based on genetically tailored micro-organisms but also involving chemical engineering and fluid mechanics. When she gets a job in a sloppily run bio-mechanical sewage plant the process-writing is good enough to convince a non-specialist like me and to illuminate her character at the same time.

Unfortunately it's at this point that Griffith rather loses control by introducing, not the true villain of the piece (who remains off-stage throughout the book and whose identity is only disclosed in the closing pages), but



Hepple, the plant manager. Hepple is a crude hate-figure: dictatorial, callous, ignorant and stupid. So how did he get put in charge of a plant full of sensitive systems costing many hundreds of millions, and capable of poisoning many thousands of people who could all sue the company should it go wrong? Answer: he's there because Griffith put him there, to indulge her prejudices and provide a plot-mechanism. Such a two-dimensional character has no place in a character-driven novel concerned with relationships – of friendship, companionship and need as well as sex and blood. His presence reduces its stature far more than the initial contrivance or the occasional mannerism, because the inevitable system failure would be more credible if it sprang from the political or economic pressures imposed on fallible human beings. Instead Griffith has to use an unconvincing conspiracy to compensate for her incredible villain. Thus doth tragedy descend to tract – which wouldn't matter, except that Griffith is a writer of considerable gifts; her command of mood, atmosphere and the telling detail are all excellent, but

I fear there are circles where her occasional crudity will command the highest praise.

Aho! This is only a second novel, but it was precisely the introduction of such a character (in *The Word for World is Forest*) which signalled the decline of Ursula Le Guin. *Verb sap.* All right, Nicola, back to your desk. B+?+ for this one, and stop sniggering at the back!

There is more than one way of getting most things right; even so, when editor Eugénio Lisboa admits in the foreword to *The Dedalus Book of Portuguese Fantasy* (Dedalus, £8.99 and £16.95) that the author of the first piece is now unread; that several named writers who have been omitted should probably have been included; and that he is already contemplating a second volume that will redress that wrong – I have to admire his courage and candour more than his circumspection.

Nor was I surprised to learn that Manuel Pinheiro Chagas is now neglected; his contribution, "The Desecrated Church," is a heavily over-written gothic ghost story of minimal plot which takes itself far too seriously. But the next item, "The Cannibals" by Alvaro do Carvalho, is something else entirely. It combines the gothic with the story of sensibility, but both elements are ludicrously overblown, and both continuously undermined by a series of asides in the manner of Poe at his most cynically frenetic. Thus, after a "dying speech" of 30 continuous lines, he informs us:

This brief tale – interrupted by all the usual pauses and hesitations, which, let it be said discreetly, I omit, lest an incident I want at all costs to be taken seriously appear instead merely picaresque – drained from him the little life he had left.

The world surely lost a genius when Carvalho died aged 24, and it's not reasonable to expect such a standard to be maintained. The remaining stories are all lush in style but vary considerably in quality. António Patrício's "The Fountain Man" introduces the interesting idea of a man who can perceive the spirit of a fountain, but drops it in favour of a conventional tale of passion; much the same happens in Manuel Teixeira-Gomes's "Blood Lust," when the interesting idea of the personality of a sex-goddess as perceived by a disreputable old man is abruptly metamorphosed into a perfunctory vampire tale. Contrariwise, Fialho de Almeida's "Mephistopheles and Margarita" is not really fantasy at all, but a hyper-social-realist account of the tribulations of a single parent in the manner of Dickens or Hans Andersen at their most lugubrious.

The general effect achieves a slightly bogus unity through the style of



Margaret Jull Costa's translation, which is never awkward and shows a professional command of English but can reduce the individuality of all but the most idiosyncratic writers. Interestingly, the two most individual of all, Carvalhal and Mário de Sá-Carneiro, were also the shortest-lived. Sá-Carneiro's 'Mystery' has its literary merits, but is more interesting as a human document in the light of the author's suicide aged 26. I suspect that his misfortune was to combine a powerful homosexual drive with a shuddering distaste for participation in any social or sexual interaction whatever; a man whose ideal conversation consisted of two chaps taking turns to talk about their souls can have had few social graces. "Mystery" also displays his ideal sexual relationship – a sentimental honeymoon culminating in a Swedenborgian fusion of the couple's souls into a compound spirit which is abruptly translated to the positive absolute, leaving their bodies in a beautiful but safely inanimate condition. Significantly, not a single word is attributed to the lady. His "Myself the Other" is no less ethereal, and much too reminiscent of Stephen Leacock's "Sorrows of a Super Soul" to be taken seriously.

The rest of the contents are unremarkable, and one feels they might have been published in *Maga*, or the *Saturday Evening Post*. There's a surrealist tale about a man in pursuit of a turtle, an encounter with a lunatic who may possibly be God come down in the world, a couple of dream stories, a haunted house; none are done badly, but all have an ephemeral air to them.

Get your library to stock it for the sake of Carvalhal.

**H**umorous fantasy depends on one or both of two ingredients: the deployment of perverse ingenuity within the discipline of the chosen mode (usually sword and sorcery), and mismatch between manner and matter. The first aspect requires original talent, and cannot be taught; the second is a skill which can be learnt, but runs the risk of becoming no less stylized than its target. The title of James Bibby's *Ronan the Barbarian* (Millennium, £15.99) defines it as depending principally on the latter, where competition is keenest.

Perhaps for that reason the mismatch is more extreme than ever, as the story is a vengeance/quest drama of the simplest kind. Ronan Smith is the only survivor from the massacre of an isolated, peaceful village; having seen his father and all his friends butchered before his eyes, he desires revenge on Nekros, who did it. All very David Gemmell, but a topic for humour? The jokes had better be good. In fact most are less than so-so. These days it takes something more than a simple reference to the generally low IQ of inbred peasants, or even their taste for buggery with goats, to bring a wintry smile to these withered lips – and no, that doesn't mean I want a long explanation of why I ought to find the reference funny. Such jokes as do work are mainly complicated punning references of the sort that don't work twice. "Vosene the Camp, Elven Hairstylist of Lothl'Oreal" is a good name, as is "The Pink Book of Ulay," as is

(for an inferior beer) "Whitebeard's Flagon," but none bears repeating; Nevacom Plains and Baq D'Or aren't even funny the first time.

Bibby's background is in television, where the humour doesn't stand still and is therefore not required to stand analysis; thus, a passing reference to "the House of Nolan, Father of Many Daughters" would work on the box because there the fact of recognizing the Nolan Sisters would do duty for the absent joke. The viewer would never notice that *les demoiselles Nolan* have no more to do with the story than my sudden, brief and pointless foray into French. Cold print is different – at least for us interlekshuls.

In fact, as the book progresses Bibby's vices come more and more to collide with his genuine virtues – after a while I found I was taking an interest in the story, and resenting time wasted on the (un)funny bits. *Ronan the Barbarian* offers pace, romance, crude but effective characterization and a hero of unexceptionable motivation, and if Bibby could just have written it straight and let the jokes arise naturally (in the manner of Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar books, for instance) instead of dragging in low-grade items to make up the numbers I might have liked it a lot. If you crease up to the work of Andrew Harman and Phil Janes, this one is for you – indeed, it's a greatly superior item – but include me out. For that matter, include yourself out, as this is obviously the book of the mini-series, and you'll find watching the box leaves both hands free to wipe drool from your chin.

Chris Gilmore

**Neil A:** Neil, glad you could make it. I got you a bitter in.

**Neil B:** Cheers. Now, what's all this about Mr Pringle breathing down your neck again...

**A:** Fire and brimstone. He wants our review in by yesterday. Or else.

**B:** Review? Which book are we talking about here?

**A:** You passed it on to me a few days ago. *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twelfth Annual Collection*, edited by Gardner Dozois (St Martin's Press, \$26.95). I've brought it along. If you'll just shift your glass...

**B:** Ah. Big bugger, isn't it?

**A:** Over 250,000 words, plus there's a summation and an honourable-mentions list which we didn't get to see in this preview copy. Remember it now?

**B:** Vaguely. Dozois *Best-ofs* – we usually like those, don't we?

**A:** A lot more than some of the other stuff Mr Pringle's given us to review. Some years are better than others, though, and nothing's come up to the *Eighth Annual Collection*. There are 23 stories in this one, several of them a

## Pints of Best-Of

Neil Jones &

Neil McIntosh

bit on the long side, by people like –.

**B:** It's coming back to me now. A lot of very l-o-n-g stories. Whatever happened to the short variety?

**A:** But then Dozois has picked all five of the novellas on the Hugo nominee list. That's pretty impressive.

**B:** Hugos? I can't recall many that did that much for me – except of course for the Terry Bisson which was warm, witty and a real delight to read.

Absolute cert for an award if ever I

read one. It's where the tight-fisted lawyer goes after secondhand car-parts in that weird Brooklyn scrapyards.

**A:** "The Hole in the Hole." Brilliant, wasn't it? Easily the best read in the book, at least of the ones I skimmed through. It's not up for a Hugo, though.

**B:** No? Then which stories are? Hang on, I'll need another pint for this. Same again? Let me guess – those two stories by what's-her-name Le Guin?

**A:** Yep. "Forgiveness Day" for the novella, "The Matter of Seggri" for novelette. They're both new Hainish stories. Cheers.

**B:** Wonder what's brought her out of hibernation? She's got short stuff everywhere these days – although "short" probably breaks the Trade Descriptions Act. Her prose is superb as usual, but that "Seggri" was a bit on the dull side. Still, the other one was first-class – let's see... "a complex political intrigue shadowing the equally complex relationship between two very different central protagonists." Stop me if I'm going too fast.

**A:** Got it. Then there was Michael



F. Flynn's "Melodies of the Heart." You know, cynical, disgraced doctor; genetic holy-grail quest; woman who's lived for 200 years, and child who won't make it to adulthood.

B: Right. A poignant if downbeat finish but took its bloody time getting there. Way too long.

A: Michael Bishop's "Cri de Coeur" – the one about the sleeper-starship and the subnormal child.

B: Rather pedestrian, that. Well-detailed, readable, but we've been here before, haven't we? Oh, and I could have done without the bloody haiku.

A: Mike Resnick's "Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge"?

B: As a series of animated history lessons, fine. As an sf story – they used to trot this one out two or three times a week back in the 1940s. These humans are oh-so-bleeding-unique, so much meaner and tougher than all us cardboard aliens, impossible to fathom, but they've got some mysterious spark about them that leaves us wishy-washy sods standing with our pseudopods in our orifice, and – Wait a minute!

You're not going to tell me that total turkey by George Turner was up for a Hugo, are you? That read like something out of a 1930s pulp – I mean, intelligent plant attacks Earthmen. What the hell was Dozois thinking of?

A: Careful, you almost had my pint over! No, Turner's "Flowering Mandrake" isn't on the ballot, surprisingly enough. The fifth story is Brian Stableford's "Les Fleurs de Mals." How about that, then? A British writer up for a Hugo – and he's an *Interzone* regular, too. Worldcon's coming up – let's give it a major plug, shall we?

B: Couldn't finish it.

A: You never like his stuff! Well I thought it was a class story, a clever take on a jaded future. Intriguing Oscar Wilde, Watson/Holmes references, plus a murder mystery that –

B: OK. Get them in again and write whatever you want. Same again for me.

A: Right. How about the other two *Interzone* regulars. I read both of those, too. Greg Egan's "Cocoon" is on the Hugo ballot for the novelette. It was, as per usual for him, a really clever and original idea – technology that makes the womb a safer environment for babies spells effective genocide to –

B: Cheers. Yes, neat idea, but it fails to make you care enough about the private policeman lead character. Next?

A: Steve Baxter. I thought his "Cilia of Gold" about humans finding weird aliens on Mercury was excellent hard sf.

B: Physics hard, biology bloody squishy. The final twist was just daft – evolution wouldn't work like that, not over billions of years. Plus, it was all what's-going-on instead of a real story. By the way, Stableford, Egan and Baxter are *Interzone* writers. Were any of those three stories from –?

A: No, they were all published in –

B: *Asimov's*! And Dozois is the editor! I mean, I ask you, how ethical is that?

A: It is the top sf magazine. And only nine out of the 23 come from there this year. I'd say the balance is about right.

B: But he's bound to know his own magazine's stories best. What would this book look like if it was edited by that Stanalog Schmidt? Or Kristine Fantasy Rusch? Or, say our own Mr Pringle...

A: Hmm. Now that definitely calls for another drink.

B: My round. Speaking of our editor, which were the ritual two *Interzone* stories in this *Best-of*?

A: The Geoff Ryman and the Katherine Kerr. Now we've got to find something nice to say about one of them, at least. Cheers.

B: Actually, Ryman's "Dead Space for the Unexpected" was a good 'un. A very sharp sketch of corporate life in an uncomfortably near future. Essential reading for paranoid office-workers.

A: Yes, great, wasn't it?

B: You read it then?

A: Yes. Sort of.

B: Hang on – the Ryman story was in the *Interzone/Nexus* issue. Did Dozois say anything about *Nexus*?

A: Only in the very small print on the acknowledgements page.

B: That doesn't count. I reckon Paul (Mr Moaning Minnies) Brazier deserves a big pat on the back for prising that gem out of Ryman. When you write this up, be sure to mention him. It's only fair. Besides, you never know, we might even get a drink out of it.

A: What about Kerr's "Asylum"?

B: Reasonable. Fascist coup state-side viewed from the perspective of an involuntary exile in the UK. Only trouble with that one was, I had the uneasy feeling it was a lot more likely to be a Brit sitting in the US watching a coup play out over here... Right, any other stories we can be nice about?

A: Yes, there was one I absolutely knew you'd go for, just from the title, so I went ahead and roughed something out. "In the same rock-music/alternate-worlds tradition as 'Dori Bangs' and 'Snodgrass,' Walter Jon Williams's 'Red Elvis' is a stunning –"

B: Retread. Done before and better in the other two stories. I never believed in the alternate twist of rock-and-roll. Oh, a very good twist though.

A: God, you're hard to please. What did you think of "None So Blind" by Joe Haldeman? That's up for the short-story Hugo.

B: Darkly funny, about a man literally blinded by science, and by a kind of love. Good one. It was short, too.

A: So was Nancy Kress's "Margin of Error."

B: Yes, a sharp tale of nanomolecular sabotage, that.

A: Howard Waldrop's "The Sawing Boys"?

B: A shimmering moment provision-

ally balanced somewhere in the southern US of A in the 1920s, journey matters more than the destination, etc. And I wish someone had got round to bloody telling me what the hell was supposed to be going on. Oh, and then there was that other weird piece – the one that yawed dizzily across various reference points betwixt 90s New York and the Big Bang. Writing impressive, but heavy going in places.

A: Must be Eliot Fintushel's "Ylem." Want a half to go in that?

B: A pint, thanks.

A: Yes, good idea. Now, better give me a few more quotes to pad it out. Going through the contents list, we still have... Mary Rosenblum's "California Dreaming."

B: Sisterly feelings, feminist sensibility, the pain of loss, eco-disaster... er... is it over yet?

A: Lisa Goldstein's "Split Light."

B: Tidy piece of historical faction, and a compelling read in places. Still, not sf and it shouldn't be here. You have to draw lines. Which also goes for that folksy Amerindian fantasy, what was it called?

A: "Going After Old Man Alabama" by William Sanders. What about Maureen F. McHugh's "Nekropolis," the love story between the artificial man and the woman who was effectively a slave, bonded emotionally to her employer/owner?

B: Yes, an interesting idea, set in an intriguing future middle east. Well-written, and involving.

A: "The Remoras" by Robert Reed? Passenger inside vast starship cruising the galaxy becomes fascinated by the strange mutants who spend their lives sealed in spacesuits, out on the ship's hull.

B: Nice try, but not-so-involving. Have we clocked up all 23 yet?

A: One left. A big name. Pat Cadigan with "Paris in June."

B: A downer. Scores on its alien viewpoint perspective, I suppose, but it was very difficult to like and a real effort to wade through to the end.

A: Almost finished. Now, the book's published by St Martin's Griffin, but it only gives the price in dollars: \$26.95 for the hardback, \$16.95 paperback. What's that in real money?

B: Probably about the same as another round of drinks. They're calling last orders. One for the road?

A: All right. My shout. But we've got to finish this bloody thing off. If I don't get it to Mr Pringle by breakfast tomorrow, he'll staple –

B: In a nutshell then: Mostly high-quality stuff, probably the best of the year – from *Asimov's* certainly, good reading, undoubtedly excellent value for money. How's that?

A: Neil, I couldn't have put it better myself.

B: Cheers.

Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh



The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alexander, Lloyd. **The Black Cauldron: The Chronicles of Prydain, Part Two.** Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-1773-4, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Robertson, £3.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1965; this book formed the basis of one of the Disney organization's less memorable feature-length cartoons [1985], but the film isn't mentioned anywhere here.) 24th August 1995.

Alexander, Lloyd. **The Book of Three: The Chronicles of Prydain, Part One.** Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-1775-0, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Robertson, £3.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1964; Alexander's Welsh-flavoured kids' fantasies seem to have become accepted as classics on much the same level as Lewis's "Narnia" books.) 24th August 1995.

Anderson, Poul. **Harvest the Fire.** Illustrated by Vincent Di Fate. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85943-0, 190pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Sf novella, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to *Harvest of Stars* [1993] and *The Stars Are Also Fire* [1994], but very much slimmer than those two chunky books.) October 1995.

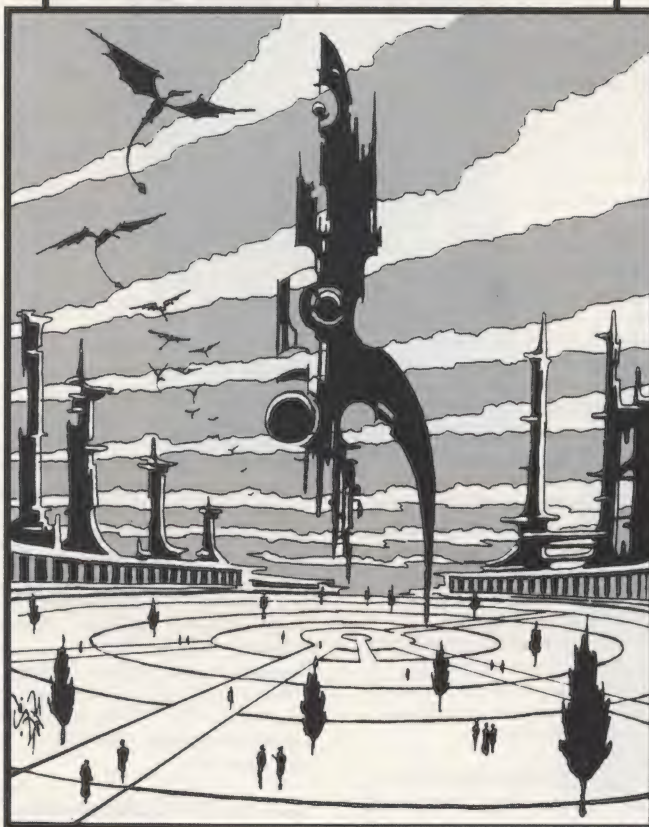
Ashwell, Pauline. **Project Farcry.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85861-2, 384pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel by a British author of mature years, completely unknown in her native country; she writes in the tradition of Robert A. Heinlein, which is no doubt why she's appreciated in the USA; in the 1950s she occasionally wrote as "Paul Ash," and was sometimes mistaken for a pseudonym of the above author, Poul Anderson.) November 1995.

Bear, Gregory. **Legacy.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-935051-3, 409pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; a follow-up to *Eon* and *Eternity*.) 3rd August 1995.

Benford, Gregory. **Furious Gulf.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06100-6, 341pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Dismukes, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 95.) 24th August 1995.

Benford, Gregory. **Sailing Bright Eternity.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06097-2, 404pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the sixth and last in the author's "Galactic Centre cycle";

## Books Received



### July 1995

the previous volumes, published over two decades, were *In the Ocean of Night*, *Across the Sea of Suns*, *Great Sky River*, *Tides of Light* and *Furious Gulf*.) 24th August 1995.

Bowker, David. **The Death Prayer.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05950-8, 254pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Crime/horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; this appears to be a first novel by a British journalist and radio writer.) 14th September 1995.

Brenchley, Chaz. **Dead of Light.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-62807-3, 330pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) September 1995.

Cady, Jack. **The Off Season: A Victorian Sequel.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-13574-2, 304pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Timeslip fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; Cady is an American writer of high repute, author of at least ten previous books, some of them regarded as "horror," some of them unclassifiable; he seems not to have been published in Britain, perhaps because he's hard to pigeon-hole and therefore difficult to market; admirers of, say, Jonathan Carroll might want to check him out.) November 1995.

Cherryh, C. J. **Foreigner.** "A novel of first contact." Legend, ISBN 0-09-944401-1, 378pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 20th July 1995.

Cherryh, C. J. **Invader.** "The stunning sequel to *Foreigner*." Legend, ISBN 0-09-944411-9, 426pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Whelan, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 20th July 1995.

Cohen, Jack, and Ian Stewart. **The Collapse of Chaos: Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World.** Penguin, ISBN 0-14-024675-4, 495pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1994; Jack Cohen is a well-known man-about-sf, and the book comes with a commendation from Terry Pratchett.) No date shown: received in July 1995.

Cooper, Louise. **Star Ascendant.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85871-X, 351pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1994; proof copy received; in Britain, it was billed as "The Star Shadow Trilogy, Book 1," though that subtitle is not mentioned on this American proof; however, we are given the information that it's a prequel to her much earlier "Time Master" trilogy.) November 1995.

D'Amassa, Don. **Twisted Images.** Necronomicon Press [PO Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893, USA], ISBN 0-940884-64-X, 31pp, small-press paperback, cover by Robert H. Knox, \$4.95. (Horror novelette, first edition; the author is well known as a prolific reviewer of sf/fantasy books, but he has also written fiction of his own, including

the novel *Blood Beast*.) Late entry: April publication, received in July 1995.

Datlow, Ellen, ed. **Little Deaths: 24 Tales of Horror and Sex.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-254-1, 454pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror anthology, first published in 1994; it contains stories by Harry Crews, Nicola Griffith, M. John Harrison, Kathe Koja, Joel Lane, Nicholas Royle, Melanie Tem, Jack Womack, and various other folks with names like Barker, Cadigan, Jeter, Malzberg, Oates, Rendell and Shepard.) 7th August 1995.

De Lint, Charles. **Memory & Dream.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-64298-8, 511pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published as *Memory and Dream* [no ampersand] in the USA, 1994.) 25th August 1995.

Dowling, Terry. **An Intimate Knowledge of the Night.** Aphelion [PO Box 619, North Adelaide, S.A. 5006, Australia], ISBN 1-875346-15-5, 284pp, B-format paperback, cover by Nick Stathopoulos, A\$14.95 [£5]. (Sf/fantasy/horror collection, first edition; it contains copious new linking matter.) No date shown: received in July 1995.

Eddings, David. **The Hidden City: The Tamuli, Book Three.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21317-1, 616pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 24th July 1995.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **Belgarath the Sorcerer: The Prequel to the Belgariad.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13845-9, 662pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; Leigh Eddings, David's wife, is credited for the first time on this novel, although a prefatory note states that in fact all past books under the Eddings byline have been collaborations between the two; it's odd that it's taken them so long to go public on the matter.) 27th July 1995.

Edghill, Rosemary. **Book of Moons: A Bast Mystery.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85605-9, 220pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (Crime/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; second in a series about a sleuth who also happens to be a witch; "Rosemary Edghill" is a pseudonym of sf/fantasy writer Eluki Bes Shahar.) November 1995.

Evans, Christopher. **Mortal Remains.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06083-2, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; this appears to be Evans's first out-and-out piece of "space fiction" since his debut novel of almost 20 years ago, *Capella's Golden Eyes*.) 14th September 1995.



Fearn, John Russell. **Emperor of Mars: Book #1 in the Famous Mars Quartet.** "In the grand tradition of Edgar Rice Burroughs." Introduction by Philip Harbottle. Gryphon Publications [PO Box 280-209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209, USA], ISBN 0-936071-47-8, 128pp, small-press paperback [with dustjacket], cover by Ron Turner, \$15. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1950; this is an approximate facsimile of a very early sf paperback from Hamilton & Co. [Stafford] Ltd – the publishing house that later evolved into Panther Books [then Granada, then Grafton, and now the proud HarperCollins]; volumes 2, 3 and 4 of the series are also being reissued by Gryphon this year; the originals are rare, and none of them has been reprinted before.) July 1995.

Finnis, A., ed. **13 Again.** Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-55914-1, 361pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Young-adult horror anthology, first edition; it contains all-original stories by Colin Greenland, Garry Kilworth, Graham Masterton, Stan Nicholls, Laurence Staig, Lisa Tuttle and others.) July 1995.

Gear, W. Michael, and Kathleen O'Neal Gear. **People of the Sea.** Tor, ISBN 0-330-33913-3, 560pp, paperback, £4.99. (Prehistoric sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; fifth in a series about the post-Ice Age peopling of America some 10-12,000 years ago, it's set in ancient California; *Locus* doesn't regard such "prehistoricals" as a sub-species of sf, but we do – they are stories inspired by the perspectives opened up by modern science; this is the American mass-market edition of 1994 with a British price sticker, distributed by Pan Books; we received the first, *People of the Wolf*, about 18 months ago: what happened to volumes 2, 3 and 4?) 11th August 1995.

Halam, Ann. **The Haunting of Jessica Raven.** Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-069-8, 124pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £3.99. (Juvenile sf/horror novel, first published in 1994; "Ann Halam" is a pseudonym of Gwyneth Jones.) No date shown: received in July 1995.

Hambly, Barbara. **Bride of the Rat God.** Raven, ISBN 1-85487-418-7, 336pp, A-format paperback, cover by Luis Rey, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; it's set in 1920s Hollywood and involves a silent-movie star and an ancient Chinese curse.) 27th July 1995.

Harbinson, W. A. **Millennium: Projekt Saucer, Book Four.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-61753-X, 617pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £5.99. (Sf/horror novel, first edition [?]; it's yet another UFO-conspiracy tale in its author's usual vein; "Harbinson is a combination of H. G. Wells and Frederick Forsyth," claims Colin Wilson on the back cover.) 17th August 1995.

Jones, Jenny. **The Webbed Hand.** Point Fantasy, ISBN 0-590-55649-5, 324pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Scutt, £3.50. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first edition; Scholastic Publications Ltd, who do the various "Point" imprints [Point Fantasy, Point SF, Point Horror, Point Crime, etc], kindly sent us this one after we'd complained at not receiving some of their books; the author is the same Jenny Jones who has published several adult novels with Headline and Gollancz.) Late entry: 1994 publication, received in July 1995.

Kilworth, Garry. **House of Tribes.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03376-0, 430pp, hardcover, cover and internal illustrations by Paul Robinson, £12.99. (Animal fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this one is about mice – "steeped in mouse history and rich in mouse lore," according to the blurb – and it marks yet another change of publisher for Kilworth; it's very nicely packaged, with line drawings by Paul Robinson throughout, so let's hope it will bring Garry the sort of Richard Adams/William Horwood scale of success that he deserves.) 9th November 1995.

King, Francis. **The One and Only.** Allison & Busby, ISBN 0-7490-0242-5, 208pp, B-format paperback, cover by Michael Leonard, £7.99. (Crime/horror [?] novel, first published in 1994; the genre status of this book by a veteran British writer is uncertain; but it has been sent to us for review, so it may have some fantastic content; Ruth Rendell and others commend it.) 17th August 1995.

Laws, Stephen. **Daemonic.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-450-60692-9, 488pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Blake, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 19th October 1995.

Lee, Tanith. **Reigning Cats and Dogs.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1431-X, 214pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Salwowski, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; almost every month seems to bring something new from Tanith Lee, who remains an astonishingly productive talent.) 10th August 1995.

Louvish, Simon. **What's Up God?: A Romance of the Apocalypse.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05994-X, 216pp, hardcover, cover by John Bradley, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the author is a Glasgow-born, Israeli-raised, part-time teacher in a London film school; he has written eight previous novels, including at least one that was a fantasy, *Resurrections from the Dustbin of History* [1992].) 5th July 1995.

Lucas, Tim. **Throat Sprockets.** "A novel of erotic obsession." Fourth Estate, ISBN 1-85702-318-8, 232pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; this is a movie buff's debut novel, of which we've heard

good reports [and it's attractively priced by today's standards]; from the jacket-flap blurb, it sounds a bit like Theodore Roszak's excellent *Flicker*, although the publishers prefer to describe it as "Anne Rice meets Bret Easton Ellis in a dark alley!") 21st August 1995.

McCaffrey, Anne. **The Dolphins of Pern.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14270-0, 320pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Weston, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 7th September 1995.

McDonald, Ian. **Chaga.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06052-2, 413pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the half-title page carries an intriguing subtitle [not used on cover or title page proper], "A Novel of Africa, Ambition, the Alien, and Football"; it's an expansion of his 1990 short story "Towards Kilimanjaro," or rather, as McDonald puts it, that story was "a working prototype" for this novel.) 19th October 1995.

McDowell, Michael. **The Elementals.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-616640-7, 332pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1981.) 7th August 1995.

Mason, Lisa. **The Golden Nineties.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09503-X, 369pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; about a 25th-century Chinese woman time-travelling back to 1890s San Francisco, it's the first book we've ever seen by this author, who is described in the blurb as "one of science fiction's most exciting young talents" [though she's in her 40s]; her previous titles are *Arachne*, *Cyberweb* and *Summer of Love*.) 9th October 1995.

Masters, Anthony, and Hugh Colmer. **Hidden Gods: The Doorway.** Constable, ISBN 0-09-473280-9, 187pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as a "metaphysical thriller," involving "secret codes of Atlantis" and suchlike; Masters has written many crime novels and children's books in the past.) October 1995.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Death of Chaos.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85721-7, 479pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the fifth book in the "Recluce" series.) September 1995.

Moorcock, Michael. **The Birds of the Moon: A Travellers' Tale.** Illustrated by Mark Reeve. Jayde Design [45 St Mary's Mansions, St Mary's Rd., London W2 1SH], ISBN 0-9520074-1-X, 24pp, small-press paperback, £2.50. (Fantasy short story, first edition; originally written for the *New Statesman*, but not published there.) 19th July 1995.

Moorcock, Michael. **The Eternal Champion.** "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 2." Millen-

nium, ISBN 1-85798-250-9, 659pp, A-format paperback, cover by Yoshitaka Amano, £5.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in 1992; it contains *The Eternal Champion* [1970; not "1957" as the copyright details so misleadingly state], *Phoenix in Obsidian* [1970] and *The Dragon in the Sword* [1986] plus a short preface by the author.) 7th August 1995.

Nasir, Jamil. **Quasar.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56886-8, 207pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by the Palestinian-American author who has contributed a couple of stories to *Interzone* in the past.) 9th October 1995.

Nicholls, Stan. **Strange Invaders.** Point SF, ISBN 0-590-13102-8, 269pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £3.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; Stan Nicholls has contributed many author interviews to *Interzone* in the past; to the best of our knowledge, this is his first novel other than juvenile movie novelizations such as *Tom & Jerry*.) July 1995.

Palmer, Jessica. **Fire Wars: Book Two in the Renegades Series.** Point Fantasy, ISBN 0-590-55491-3, 344pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £3.50. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first edition; Scholastic Publications kindly sent us this one after we'd complained at not receiving some of their books; the first volume in the trilogy was entitled *Healer's Quest* [1993] and the third, *Return of the Wizard*, was received by us and listed here a couple of months ago.) Late entry: 1994 publication, received in July 1995.

Palmer, Maria. **Leo: Blood Ties.** "Horrorscopes." Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-1861-7, 115pp, A-format paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition; "Maria Palmer" is a house name for this series based on the signs of the zodiac; this volume is copyrighted to Paul Cornell.) 24th August 1995.

Palmer, Maria. **Virgo: Snake Inside.** "Horrorscopes." Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-1855-2, 138pp, A-format paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition; "Maria Palmer" is a house name, and this volume is copyrighted to Lisa Tuttle.) 24th August 1995.

Rawn, Melanie. **Skybowl: Dragon Star, Book III.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-33318-6, xii+672pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 25th August 1995.

Rice, Jane. **The Sixth Dog.** Necronomicon Press [PO Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893, USA], ISBN 0-940884-74-7, 28pp, small-press paperback, cover by Jason Eckhardt, \$4.95. (Horror novelette, first edition; the author is a veteran, a one-time contributor to John W. Campbell's *Unknown* magazine, but this is her first book.) Late entry: April publication, received in July 1995.



Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Pacific Edge**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21457-7, 280pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; third in the loose "Orange County" trilogy; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 45.) 24th July 1995.

Scott, Melissa, and Lisa A. Barnett. **Point of Hopes**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85844-2, 384pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a belated follow-up to the same authors' *The Armor of Light* [1987]; it belongs to the "fantasy of manners" school, which we note that editor David Hartwell, in his accompanying publicity letter, is now referring to as "mannerpunk" [oh dear].) December 1995.

Sinclair, Iain. **Radon Daughters**. Vintage, ISBN 0-09-942671-4, 458pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. ("Literary" horror novel, first published in 1994; a third novel by the author of *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* and *Downriver* [he has also written seven volumes of poetry], it is, for some reason, full of references to William Hope Hodgson.) July 1995.

Spencer, William Browning. **Zod Wallop**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-13629-3, 278pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition;

proof copy received; a third novel by a fairly new American writer [not to be confused with the British sf short-story writer William Spencer] whose previous books, *Maybe I'll Call Anna* [1990], *The Return of Count Electric* [collection, 1993] and *Résumé with Monsters* [1995], were all published by a small press.) November 1995.

Tem, Melanie. **Desmodus**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1274-0, 248pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received.) 14th September 1995.

Trewninard, Philip. **The Burning**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06056-5, 352pp, hardcover, cover by James Goodridge, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous A-format paperback edition [not seen]; the British author, born 1946, has written three previous novels, "a thriller and two comedies.") 12th October 1995.

Vallejo, Boris. **Boris Vallejo's 3D Magic**. Images created by Al. E. Barber. Dragon's World/Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85028-365-6, unpaginated, hardcover, £12.95. (Hologrammed fantasy art portfolio, first edition; it contains 28 colour plates; you stick your nose close to the page, pull back

slowly, keeping your eyes unfocused at first, and you should get a 3-D effect ... it works! — most of the time.) 10th August 1995.

Weaver, Tom. **They Fought in the Creature Features: Interviews with 23 Classic Horror, Science Fiction and Serial Stars**. McFarland [distributed in Britain by Shelving Ltd, 4 Playdell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-7864-0019-6, ix+318pp, hardcover, £34.65. (Illustrated collection of interviews with sf/horror film actors; first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American edition with a British price added; most of the material is reprinted from the magazine *Starlog* [although in expanded form]; interviewees include Julie Adams, John Agar, Lloyd Bridges, Ricou Browning, Anne Francis, June Lockhart, Jeff Morrow, Rex Reason, Jane Wyatt and many other immortals of the tacky, low-budget, 1950s sci-fi scene; a fun book for all sf film enthusiasts.) 26th October 1995.

Wisman, Ken. **Weird Family Tales II: The Curse Continues**. Introduction by Peter Crowther. Dark Regions Press [PO Box 6301, Concord, CA 94524, USA], no ISBN shown, viii+47pp, small-press paperback, cover by Don Schank,

\$6.95. (Fantasy/horror collection, first edition; it's bound back-to-back with a reprint of the same author's *Weird Family Tales I: A Journal of Familial Maledictions* [xii+47pp], originally published in 1993 and reviewed in *Interzone* 74 by Pete Crowther.) Late entry: June publication, received in July 1995.

Wolfe, Gene. **Caldé of the Long Sun: The Third Volume of The Book of the Long Sun**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-61011-X, 371pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 91.) 17th August 1995.

Wurts, Janny. **Warhost of Vastmark: The Wars of Light and Shadows, Volume 3**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224619-8, 384pp, hardcover, cover by Janny Wurts, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it carries a prominent acknowledgment to "the sales force at HarperCollins whose efforts make all the difference, and to those who work in the bookshops, who handle the dreams of authors," which seems like a canny attempt to butter up the middle-persons who matter; but then this is a novelist who designs her own covers, so she probably has more to do with sales reps than most.) 24th August 1995.

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Darksaber**. "Star Wars." Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09974-4, 399pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first edition; proof copy received; "with nearly ten million copies in print, and more than 100 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, Bantam's STAR WARS publishing program is rapidly becoming one of the hottest publishing properties in all of publishing.") 9th October 1995.

Anderson, Kevin J., ed. **Tales From the Mos Eisley Cantina**. "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40971-9, x+387pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf movie-spinoff shared-world anthology, first published in the USA, 1995; it contains original stories, all taking their inspiration from the famous bar scene in *Star Wars*, by David Bischoff, A. C. Crispin, Barbara Hambly, Judith & Garfield Reeves-Stevens, Kathy Tyers, Dave Wolverton, Timothy Zahn and others.) 10th August 1995.

Cornell, Paul, Martin Day and Keith Topping. **The New Trek Programme Guide**. Virgin, ISBN 0-86369-922-7, 378pp, A-format

paperback, cover by Adrian Mitchell, £5.99. (Sf television-series guide, first edition; in the information-packed but unillustrated style of earlier volumes in this series, it covers all seven seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the first two seasons of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.) July 1995.

Grant, Charles. **The X-Files: Whirlwind**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648205-8, 264pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf/horror television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; based on the characters created by script-writer Chris Carter, this is Grant's second novel in the series, and apparently his first sold very well indeed.) 24th July 1995.

Haining, Peter. **Doctor Who — A Celebration: Two Decades Through Time and Space**. Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-86369-932-4, 256pp, very large-format paperback, £14.99. (Sf television-series illustrated guide, first published in 1983; this is a straight reprint, not an updated edition.) 20th July 1995.

Jarman, Colin M., and Peter Acton. **Judge Dredd: The Mega-History**. Lennard, ISBN 1-85291-128-X, 144pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Mike

McMahon, £12.99. (Illustrated history of the sf comic-strip character, first edition; a couple of issues ago I criticized a book called *The A-Z of Judge Dredd* by Mike Butcher [Hamlyn] for not containing "such basic information as who created the character and when, and which writers and artists have perpetuated him over the years"; well, this is the book I was hoping for then: it deals in exhaustive detail with the precise history and development of the strip; 2000 A.D. editor Pat Mills was probably the prime creator, though many, many other hands have contributed to the Dredd myths, both before and after his first appearance in 1977; this volume is packed with relevant information for those who want that type of information; recommended.) 10th July 1995.

Lovell, Jim, and Jeffrey Kluger. **Apollo 13**. Coronet, ISBN 0-340-63806-0, 378pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Dramatized historical account of a near-disaster in space, here reissued as a movie tie-in; first published in the USA as *Lost Moon: The Perilous Voyage of Apollo 13*, 1994; although co-author Lovell was one of the prime participants in the Apollo 13 space mission of 1970 [commander of the moon capsule], this book is told in

the third person throughout, with reconstructed [or made-up?] dialogue, and a film has now been based on it — *Apollo 13*, directed by Ron Howard, with Tom Hanks as Lovell; so at what point does non-fiction become "fiction"?; we've always felt that all those World War II books of the 1950s — *The Dam Busters*, say — became fiction [of a kind] when they were turned into films; if so, this book is a rare example of "true-life" science fiction.) 18th August 1995.

Perry, Steve, Stephani Perry and David Bischoff. **Aliens vs. Predator Omnibus, Volume One: Prey & Hunter's Planet**. [We've taken the title from the cover in this case, as the actual title page is a hard-to-parse jumble.] Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-419-6, 259pp+260pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff omnibus, first edition; the two novels it contains, the first by the Perrys, the second by Bischoff, were originally published in the USA, 1994; they're based on graphic novels published by Dark Horse, which in turn were based on the Twentieth Century Fox *Predator* and *Aliens* films, and on the designs for the first of the latter series by artist H. R. Giger.) 7th August 1995.

Tilton, Lois. **Accusations**. "Babylon 5, Book 2." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0649-4, 278pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; inspired by the Warner Bros. TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski.) 20th July 1995.



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**HARM'S WAY** – "What if Charles Dickens had written a space opera?" (*Locus*) – large paperback, £3.50. *The Hour of the Thin Ox* and *Other Voices*, paperbacks, £1.50 each. Prices include postage. Colin Greenland, 2a Ortygia House, 6 Lower Road, Harrow, Middx. HA2 0DA.

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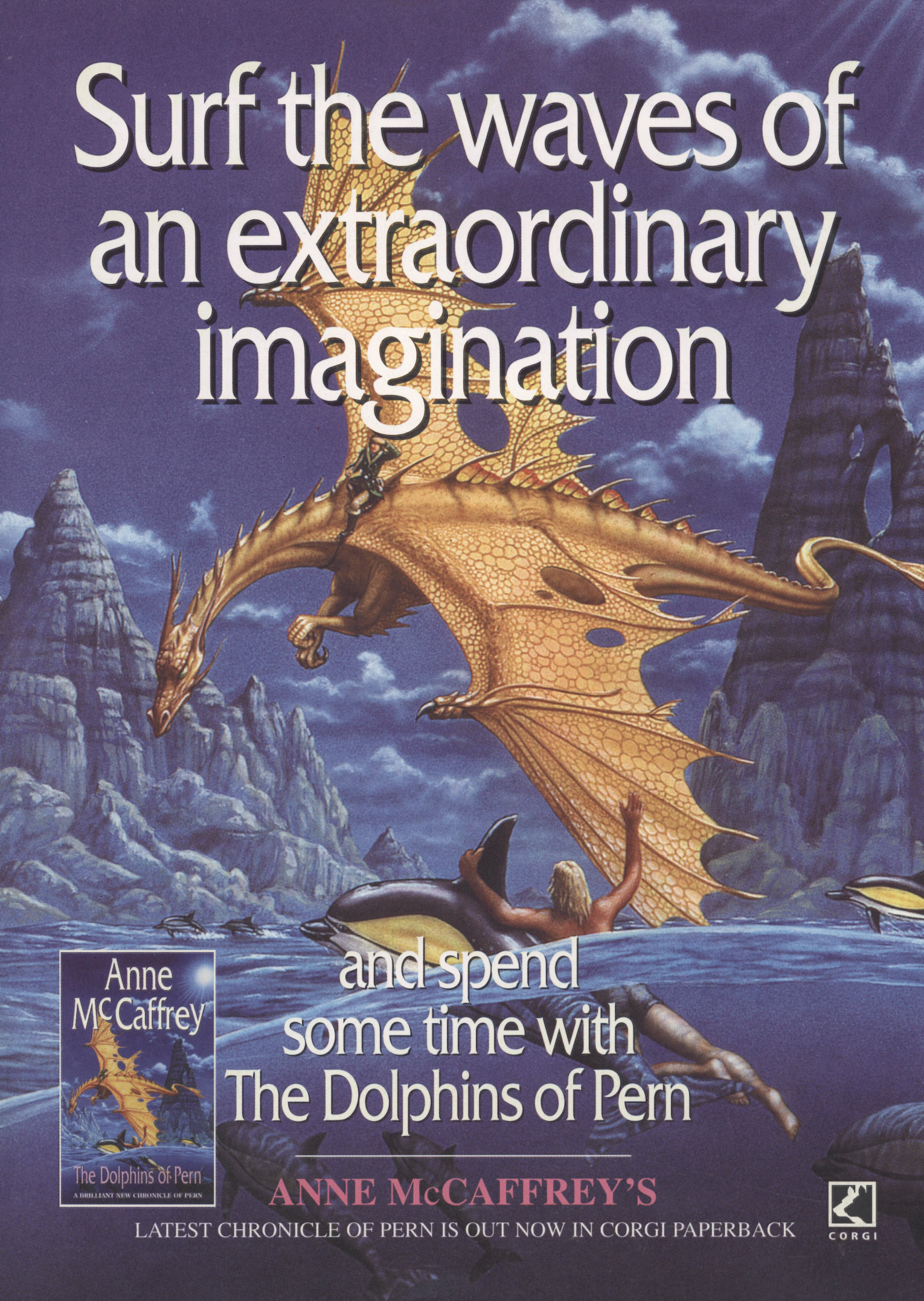
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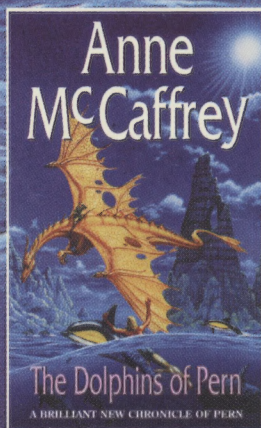
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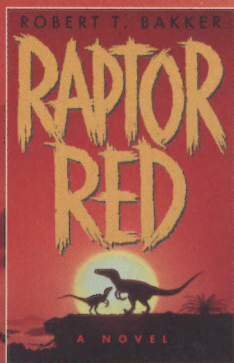
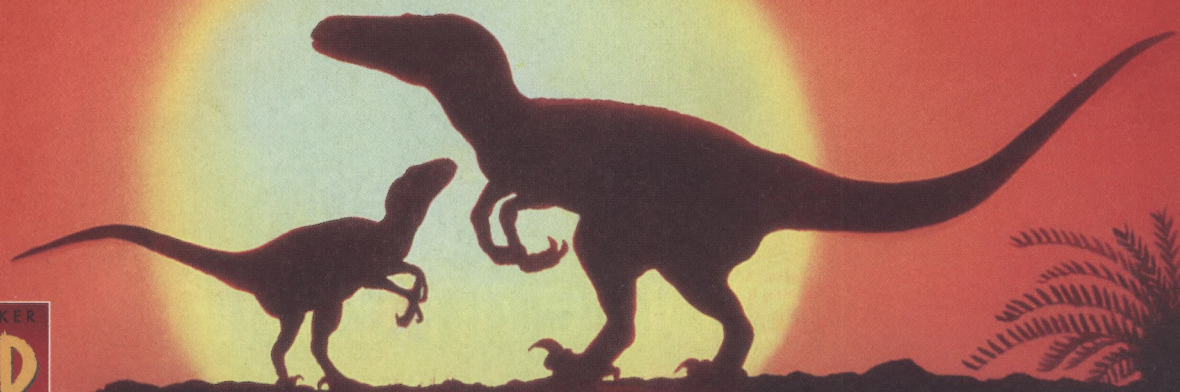




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